

A firecracker named July by Thecricketsarecalling

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Summary: Billy meets a girl at Hawkins. Only problem is...she's dying.

1. Billy meets a firecracker

Hawkins Indiana - October 1984

"Billy?"

Susan stepped into the living room where Billy was currently lifting weights surrounded by boxes from the move despite the fact they had officially arrived to two less than two weeks ago. Neil was at work, and Max was outside skateboarding in the driveway. Billy had pulled up less than a half an hour ago, and had disappeared in his room for a few minutes before blasting his stereo and headed to the living room to lift weights. Neil had transformed the den into the unofficial living room area, while the side room right off the door had turned into Billy's workout area. Neil only allowed this for the time being, warning him that by the end of the month he wanted all this "shit" picked up and put into his room. Bad enough half of his driveway had to be taken up by his piece of shit car. Billy wore basketball shorts, as he lifted well over two hundred pounds of weight above him, his muscular chest rising and falling, glistened with sweat. Susan was in the kitchen getting dinner ready, and stepped. into the doorway wiping her hands with a dishcloth.

"Billy?"

She had to speak louder so her voice would carry over the heavy blasting rock music. Billy had earlier asked if it was okay if he played his music while he worked out, as always avoiding eye contact, and being polite, just the way Neil had made him treat his stepmother. Susan said of course, knowing why he was asking permission, she tried to always look the other way when it came to how Neil treated Billy. She knew he had a major attitude problem, mostly dealing with his mother, his parent's divorce, Neil marrying her, and the move here. Neil said Billy had major emotional problems, and he just needed a firm hand. Since they officially moved, Billy was put in charge by Neil to be Max's ride whenever she needed it. At first Susan said that wasn't necessary, but Neil said this was a new town, and Billy needed to learn some responsibility for his younger sister. Still, Susan knew how Billy really felt about his step-sister, and hated that she didn't have the courage to ever say anything. Susan sighed, rising

her voice slightly.

"Billy?"

Billy heard her this time, and carefully placed the barbell into the holder, before sitting up, sweating slightly.

"Yeah?"

Susan sighed before Billy read her mind, and nodded.

"Sorry, hold on..."

He got up and entered his room, seconds later the music stopped filling the house with silence. Faintly Susan could hear Max skateboarding up and down the driveway outside, the wheels spinning against the pavement. Billy returned, still sweating, this time holding a towel from the bathroom. Draping it over his shoulder, he leaned against the wall.

"What's up?"

"Um, I hate to ask you...but the family across the street. The Criss'?"

"Yeah?"

"I introduced myself a few days after we first moved in. They have a daughter that's about your age. I guess she's sick...the mother didn't get into it, but I think it's cancer or something, poor thing. I only met her for a second and she seemed so sweet..."

She saw by the expression on Billy's face he was bored, and waiting for the point. Clearing her throat, she twisted the dishcloth between her hands as she continued.

"Well, the husband is a pilot and is away most of the time, and the mother Mrs. Criss, she's visiting her sister down state, I guess she's going to be gone the weekend and tried to phone her daughter a few times and she hasn't answered. We exchanged numbers when we first met, and she just called...I know she isn't trying to worry, but she didn't want to call the sheriff to check in on her...I was gonna run over but I was wondering if you could cross the street and knock on

the door and..."

"See if her kid isn't on the floor dead?"

Susan sighed, but tried not to let Billy's little snide remark bother her. Instead Billy rolled his eyes and nodded.

"Sure, which house?"

"The blue one right across the street, thanks Billy..."

Billy didn't answer her, instead he turned around and disappeared down the hallway, before returning just a minute later with a white T-shirt on. She was going to thank him, but saw how annoyed he looked as he passed her, and closed the door hard behind him. Stepping to the window, she pulled back the curtain and watched him pass Max who was currently trying to balance on her skateboard. Sighing, she hoped the Criss' daughter was all right. Letting the curtain go, she was snapped out of her thoughts by the oven timer going off.

Outside...

Billy passed Max who was standing on that stupid skateboard again. Ignoring her completely, he walked down the driveway, before glancing both ways of the shitty little street in this white trash nothing of a neighborhood, and instantly felt annoyed. All he wanted was to spend a little time without his dad busting his balls while he worked out. Instead here he was running stupid little errands for Susan who could have just walked across the street herself, or ask that little brat of hers to go check on this kid. Rolling his eyes, the crisp autumn air actually felt good to him since he had worked up a pretty good sweat inside. His T-shirt clung to him like a second skin as he reached the blue house and walked up the small path leading to the house. Climbing the brick steps, he stood on the front porch, before rolling his eyes, silently hoping whoever this was really wasn't dead since he really intended on continuing his workout as soon as possible.

The doorbell was actually something he had never seen before. It was a small metal end of a key. Puzzled, he stared at it for a moment

before finally figuring it out and twisting it. A soft chime sounded inside. Billy waited, feeling impatient, tapping his boot against the porch. After thirty seconds when he didn't hear anything he twisted the key again, hearing the chime. This time he curled his hand into a fist and pounded on the door.

"Hello?!"

That's when the door from the force of his first pounding on it opened, slowly swinging inward. Standing there, his first froze as he stared at the now open doorway. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Max was still skateboarding, completely carefree and unaware of what he was doing. For a second he had the urge to go get Susan, but decided against it. If the girl really was dead, or some psycho had broken in he knew somehow it would get back to his dad that he ran back to go get Susan like a little baby. Instead, he lowered his hand, frowned, and stepped inside.

"Hello?"

The living room was the first room that was off from the front door. Sitting on the sofa, with a blood stained tissue against her pinched nose was a teenager, not the kid Billy had imagined in his mind. She wore black PJ bottoms, and an old faded navy blue T-shirt. Her black hair was tied back in a messy ponytail, and her skin was China white. Her head was tilted slightly backwards, pinching her nose, before she noticed him step inside. Instantly she sat up, letting the tissue drop beside her, where Billy noticed several other crumpled up ones sat with tiny stains of blood. A small faint twinge of color filled her pale complexion, and the first thing he noticed was how green her wide round eyes looked. Billy saw her shocked expression as he instantly raised his hands.

"Hey...I'm Billy Hargrove, I live across the street. My stepmother sent me over here to check and see if you're okay...your mom called a few times and you didn't answer..."

Instantly the girl looked over at the phone which was off the cradle and she closed her eyes sighing.

"Shit..."

Billy stood there, seeing blood start to form around her left nostril, before she opened her eyes back up and smiled, looking embarrassed.

"Sorry, I had a horrible headache and took the phone off the hook...I must have forgot..."

Usually Billy wouldn't have even stayed long enough to hear whatever stupid excuse she was spitting out. He stood there, ready to mutter whatever, and to put the stupid phone back on the hook, instead he eyed her nose and motioned to her.

"Um...your nose..."

The girl blinked for a second, before instantly she reached and touched her nostril, and eyed at the blood that was dribbling out. Sighing, she reached and grabbed another tissue and brought it up to her nose.

"Jesus...I'm a mess...sorry..."

Billy shrugged, before he pointed to the phone.

"You okay? Should I call someone?" The girl smiled weakly and shook her head. "I'm fine, just a stupid side affect from some of the meds I'm on."

She dabbed at her nose, and sniffled a little before giving a small smile.

"Sorry your mom had to send you over.."

"Stepmom...and don't worry about it. Why was the door open?"

"I must not have closed it when I grabbed the mail earlier. I swear you would think being stoned on pain pills would actually be cool, but it actually turns my brains into mush. I'm surprised my mother hasn't sent the coast guard after me when I wasn't answering the phone."

Billy smirked as she chuckled to herself before he leaned against the doorway.

"Well no offense to your mom but if she worries so much, maybe she shouldn't have left you home alone."

The girl raised an eyebrow and smiled, wiping the last of the blood away from her nose.

"I'm really too sick to be in the car for that long, besides I'm usually not this stoned and stupid. Please don't say anything to your stepmom, I'm embarrassed..."

Billy eyed the living room, it was tiny but overall neat. There was light blue furniture, a hutch filled with carnival glass, and a TV sitting near the archway he expected opening up to the dinning room. An MTV music video was playing on mute. His eyes returned to her, and that same old charm he so often relied on same into play. Instead of being annoyed, he smirked. Despite the baggy T-shirt, she looked like she had a pretty nice figure, and even though he typically wasn't attracted to this type, he really did think her eyes were pretty beautiful.

"Hey, it's fine..."

"July."

"What?"

"July....July Criss. You go to Hawkins high?"

"Yeah just transferred, total shithole."

July lit up and laughed, her beautiful round green eyes squinting as her tiny nose wrinkled. Billy couldn't help but smile himself. Once her laughter settled down, July smiled, still holding her bloody tissue.

"Sorry, but I don't think I've ever heard a truer statement. I do home schooling ever since I got sick."

Billy walked over, not taking his eyes off her before he reached the sofa. July stared up at him, before her smile faded and she raised an eyebrow staring up at him. Billy didn't break his gaze, instead he reached down and plucked the tissue from her hands and brought it

up to her nose and wiped a small trickle of blood that had escaped again. Instantly July blushed again, before she took the tissue from him, and gave the bottom of her nose a good scrub.

"Sorry, gross..."

Billy shrugged.

"I get them all the time playing basketball...it's fine. Billy."

He offered her hand. July stared up at him before smirking and shook his much larger hand which seemed to swallow hers up. He turned her hand over, feeling how frail it felt in his, and how much cooler it was against his warm skin. He didn't know if this was another side effect of whatever she had. She stared up at him, before he smiled.

"Icepacks help usually."

"Really?"

"Yeah, little trick that might help."

"Thanks..."

Both continued staring at each other for a solid minute in silence, before July finally broke it but smirking.

"Where you move from?"

"California."

"Really? God I've always wanted to visit there. I heard the beaches are beautiful."

"Yeah, they can be pretty cool..."

"I always said when I get better I'm headed out there and learning how to surf."

"Surf? You wanna surf?"

"Someday. Unfortunately with a stage 3 brain tumor and living in the mid-West that dream hasn't become a reality yet."

Stage 3... Billy knew that wasn't good even though July seemed okay despite the nosebleed. She was a little pale, but otherwise looked pretty healthy.

"Well that's a damn shame since you happen to be standing next to one of the best surfers there are."

July smirked.

"Is that a fact?"

Before Billy could answer, Susan barged right in through the front door, nearly tripping over her own two feet. Billy turned and faced her, feeling her eyes glare at her as she looked at both July and then him. "Oh...I'm sorry...I didn't mean to just come in..."

Billy gave her a very annoyed look before July smiled, blushing again as she held her tissue.

"Oh my God I'm so sorry ...I didn't mean to worry anyone. I took the phone off the hook since I was getting a bad headache."

Susan eyed the bloody tissues.

"Should I call someone?"

July shook her head.

"Oh no, this is nothing really...happens all the time. I'll call my mother back right away. Sorry for worrying everyone..."

Susan sadly smiled.

"Oh don't be silly darling. We just wanted to make sure you're okay. Are you sur..."

Before she could finish, Billy turned, shooting her a look.

"She said she's fine Susan, she'll call her mom. It's okay."

"Susan eyed Billy nervously before looking down again at July.

"Would you like to come over for dinner? I made a pot roast and we

would love to have you..."

"Thank you so much, but my appetite hasn't been that great. I'm just going to call my mom and go lay down."

"Are you sure honey?"

July smiled, staying polite. "Yes, thank you."

Susan sighed before she motioned back to the door.

"I'll come by tomorrow to see if you need anything and if you need anything...anything honey don't hesitate to come on over."

July smiled and nodded.

"Thank you Mrs. Hargrove."

"Susan please."

July smiled before Susan eyed Billy.

"Dinner Billy..."

Billy stared at her.

"I'll be there in a second."

An awkward silence filled the tiny living room before Susan got the hint and blushed herself.

"Well...I'll be going. Let me know if you need anything honey, and please remember to call your mom right away."

"I will, thank you."

Susan smiled, before catching Billy's eyes for just a mere moment. Turning, she walked out the front door, leaving them alone again. July sat back, tilting her head back before running her hands over her face.

"Jesus I could die..."

"I know she's too much..."

July sat up and shook her head.

"No, you guys are so sweet thank you. I just can't believe myself. Sooner or later my mom won't ever leave me alone..."

"Hey it's fine. So...if you went to Hawkins High...what year would you be?"

"Senior, you?"

"Same."

"When does your mom come home?"

"Monday morning?"

"And your dad?"

"He's in Rio flying jets, he won't be back until next month."

"Well...can you...like leave here?"

"Like go out?"

"Yeah."

July smiled amused, "Yeah I go out, not as much now...but sometimes."

"You wanna go to a party with me tomorrow night if you're feeling better?"

"A party?"

"Yeah, I don't really know anybody yet and thought it would be fun. It's some dumb Halloween party this kid Tommy invited me to..."

"Tommy H?"

"I think so, you know him?"

"Sure, we've known each other as kids. His parents must be away to, he throws some pretty killer parties. I haven't been to any in the last year though..."

"You think you might be up to going tomorrow?"

July looked down at her crumpled up tissue before shrugging.

"Yeah...I guess so...but I might not be much fun. I can't drink with my meds...and I sometimes get light headed and sick..."

Her words trailed off, before she shook her head.

"You know what...I'm having sorta a rough weekend and I might be in trouble for worrying my mom. You're better off going alone...sorry."

Billy stared down at her and cocked his head to the side and grinned.

"Tell you know...tomorrow around eight I'll swing by. If you feel good enough to go...we'll go together for a few hours. If you feel sick, then I'll sneak over a six pack for myself and we'll watch MTV. How does that sound?"

July stared up at him before a nervous smile formed on her face.

"Um...yeah...sure."

"Remember that icepack firecracker, I'll see you tomorrow."

He winked at her, before turning and walking out the door, pulling it closed behind him, smiling knowing the stunned expression he must have left on her face.

That night...

Dinner was mostly silent, besides the sounds of chewing and silverware hitting the plates. Max kept shooting Billy dirty looks from across the table, as Susan went on and on to Neil about that "poor thing" that lived across the street. She kept thanking Billy for going over and checking on her. Neil didn't see the slightest bit impressed and ended up reading the sports section from the newspaper. Billy

planned on going out later and meet up with a couple of guys he met earlier this week who promised they had some pretty strong weed to smoke down at the park. Feeling the tension grow, his thoughts flickered back to July, and how green those eyes of hers were. He had dated and slept with plenty of women in the last few years, usually one night stands, but something about that name July kept coming back to him. It was unusual, and he seemed curious about her. Since arriving at Hawkins he had taken out a few boring high school girls, but so far hadn't slept with anyone. He knew it was just a matter of time before that happened.

Usually he liked hitting bars with his fake ID and picking up older women. He knew there was a reason behind his pattern of women, but he ignored it. Instead he kept thinking back to July, sitting there surrounded by crumpled up bloody tissues. He wondered if she had a nice rack underneath that T-shirt. Maybe tomorrow night he might get the chance to find out.

"Susan?"

Susan looked up having just dished out some more peas onto Neil's plate.

"Yeah?"

"Do you know what's wrong with July?"

"Stupid name...Jesus Christ..."

His father muttered from behind the paper. Both Billy and Susan eyed him before Susan cleared her throat, placing the bowl back down on the table.

Susan shrugged.

"Her mother only said it's a brain tumor, developed about two years ago."

"Can't they like...take it out?"

"I guess they tried before but since it's grown, there's a chance she might lose her sight. God, I could only imagine what her parents are

going through. I guess she's a really nice girl too, they said they are trying chemo but nothing seems to be working. They give her less than a year..."

Billy's face twitched for a second as he continued staring across at her. Usually something like this wouldn't bother him, let alone hearing it about a complete stranger he had just met a few hours earlier. Still, he couldn't seem to believe it. She seemed so young. Susan changed the subject when she started asking Max about school. Billy meanwhile ate silently, and afterwards got dressed to go out. Avoiding his father who was out back nursing a few beers, he grabbed his car keys and stepped out into the chilly October air. Once he went to his car, he glanced over across the street. He saw the faintly through the living room window. Billy looked around the dark neighborhood, before looking back across the street. He couldn't see her, probably laying on the sofa, but he could see the glow of the TV against the wall. Smirking, he popped a cigarette in his mouth. Smirking, he climbed into his car, and started the engine, listening to it roar to life. Music started to blast from the stereo as he backed up, and was ready to speed down the street, before he noticed his eyes drift over to July's house.

His regular Billy attitude figured she was probably too sick to go tomorrow night. More than likely she would cancel or be a complete drag to go with. What would people think if he brought the sick dying chick to the party? The other part of Billy, the one that barley existed anymore actually hoped she wouldn't be up to go to the party. He actually wouldn't mind spending a Saturday night away from all these new faces. Maybe sipping beers and watching MTV with this pretty girl might actually be nice. Who knows, a girl who didn't have long to live might be more willing to let him into her pants. With a smirk Billy eyed himself in the rearview mirror, before he gave himself a wink.

Maybe this little firecracker wouldn't fizz out as fast as he thought. Maybe she might make this shitty new town a little more interesting. With a laugh, Billy floored his car, and flew down the street.

2. The new king of Hawkins High

The next night...

Billy eyed himself in the mirror of his bedroom. He knew it was a stupid costume party, but he wasn't about to dress up like some idiot. Instead he put on a pair of dark jeans and slipped on his leather jacket. Messing with a hair for a bit, he grinned before spraying himself with his cologne, and winked at his reflection. Luckily he was able to avoid his father as he left, and crossed the street. He had a couple of six packs in his trunk hidden, and honestly didn't care whatever choice July would make. In his eyes girls who were "sick" were loners. If she didn't go to school, she must not have that many friends. She was pretty, and seemed to be flirting with him yesterday. This meant party or no party, if he laid on the same old fashion charm, he might actually end up getting lucky. Jogging across the street, he went up the pathway, climbed the few brick steps, and twisted the key that sounded the doorknob. Waiting in the darkness of this chilly October night, he patted his hair down for a second, before hooking his thumbs into his belt loops, and shifting his position, to make sure the first thing Miss July saw when she answered the door was his bare chest beneath his leather jacket. The door opened, revealing July and for the first time ever in Billy's life, he felt a strange fluttering deep in his stomach.

It was a weird feeling, as if he just went down a high drop on a rollercoaster. It was a tingling that was a mixture of himself getting horny, as well as laying his eyes on something he really liked. July stood in a dark black lace dress that clung to her thin pale frame. It had a plunging neckline, showing the two perfectly round mounds of flesh that were her breast. Her black hair was styled in a tight bun, with two curls on each side, framing her face. What he really liked was her makeup. She wore a dark shade of eye makeup, and her lips were painted ruby red.

It was honestly hard to believe that this "girl" had a massive brain tumor and was currently dying. No way. Billy didn't even try to hide his stunned expression. Instead his light blue eyes very slowly looked her up and down. A very amused, as well as thick hunger of an

expression settled upon his face. Instantly July rolled her eyes holding her purse.

"What are you supposed to be? A biker?" Billy smirked staring at her.

"The new king of Hawkins High. What are you?"

July smiled, her eyelashes appeared to be much longer as the light from the porch caught the pools of green and seemed to sparkle at him.

"Well...I'm death of course."

Billy chuckled, before offering his hand.

"So you up for this?"

"Absolutely, been going crazy in there, nice to actually get out and see some real people besides doctors."

Billy smiled, taking her hand as she closed the door behind her, and the two began to climb the steps towards his car. Both were unaware that Neil was spying on them through one of the kitchen windows. Susan was watching television in the den, and he had gotten up and grab himself a few more beers. He caught sight of his son crossing the street when he went to the fridge, and stood in the shadows watching them. He watched as Billy opened up the girl's side of the door to that shitbox he treated like an actual real race car, before shutting it and circling around and climbing in himself. One thing he did agree with his son on was by looking at July, she certainly didn't look sick. Seeing the car's headlights come on, and hear the roar of the engine, he rolled his eyes before opening the fridge and grabbing himself three more beers. Kicking the fridge closed, he went to the den where Susan was, and plopped down in his chair. Susan was knitting and eyed him.

"Billy leave?"

"Yeah...saw him just take off with that girl from across the street. Both look like idiots with how they dressed."

Susan gave a small nervous smile.

"Hey, they are teenagers...better yet teenagers on Halloween."

Neil shrugged before popping open his beer car and slowly putting his feet up.

"Yeah well I guess it's Halloween every single day in that boy's mind."

Susan sighed.

"I think it's nice he's taking that girl out, seeing that they just met."

Neil made a face as he stared at whatever program was playing on the television. To him, Billy was nothing but pure disappointment. Just a reminder of the past, including that stupid little bitch of a first wife he had. Since she decided to split, disappearing up the coast to probably screw a bunch of younger guys, he was stuck with the little pussy. He had seriously screwed things up back on the West coast, and Neil promised himself if he couldn't behave and stay out of his way, he would simply have to take care of it...as he always did.

"Yeah...real nice..." He muttered as he began to sip his beer.

Meanwhile...

Billy pushed the Camaro well above seventy on the back farm roads, lightly tapping his hand against the wheel to the music blasting from his radio. He carefully eyed July who sat in the passenger seat, hoping he was making her nervous as almost every rider, including that little shit Max. He was waiting to see her grab onto the door handle, or grip the seats beneath her and ask her to slow down in a soft frightened voice. As always Billy would laugh and take his eyes off the road, doing the same playful game he was so used to holding. He would ask if she was nervous? Or if she thought he was a bad driver? He would speed up a little more until she was practically crying.

That would establish things right off the bat. He was in charge, and nothing scared or bothered him. Instead he saw her calmly sitting beside him, legs crossed. He eyed her, really admiring the view as her breasts slowly lifted and fell as she breathed. He could faintly smell from beneath the scent of the leather of the car, his cologne, and

cigarettes from his ashtray the smell of her perfume. It wasn't suffocating like what other girls wore. No, this was sweeter, in fact it actually smelled intoxicating. He saw she was giving zero reaction to his driving, so he pushed the speed up to eighty five. Still nothing. Billy eyed her before she leaned down and picked up a handful of discarded cassettes that littered the floor. Holding them up, she squinted and smiled.

"Def Leppard, Motley Crue, Van Halen..."

She smiled to herself, making Billy keep finding himself glancing over at those smooth ruby colored lips of hers.

"Nice taste in music..."

Billy glanced over and smirked.

"You like this type of music?"

"I like all kinds of music..."

Billy eyed her before smiling and slowly running his tongue over his bottom lip before laughing gently. July stared at him smiling, before she sat back.

"Got any Aerosmith?"

Billy glanced over at her again and smirked.

"Um yeah, in the glove compartment..."

He watched as July twisted the knob to open it and began digging through the other tapes, unaware that he was actually lessening his speed.

Later...

The party was packed, and Billy walked in with July on his arm taking in his surroundings. This Tommy fella seemed like an okay kid, a little hyper and immature, but from speaking to him at school, he saw he was a leech. Would cling onto whoever seemed to be the coolest. After hearing so much about this "King Steve" he wanted to

make sure that tonight people would realize there was a new contender in town. The first thing that surprised him was how many people knew July. For a girl who actually didn't go to school anymore, within the first few minutes of walking inside the crowded house, at least twenty-five plus teenagers all lit up when they saw her and ran over saying hi. Billy tried to play it cool. He knew there was a certain mystery about himself, and he knew people were wondering about him. He liked that so many people knew July, she was cute and really didn't seem that sick.

He liked having some cute arm candy, but instantly felt his nostrils flare when at least three different guys ran over hugging her. He stood back glaring, but July didn't seem to notice. She kept introducing him, and everyone seemed pretty surprised she had came with him. When finally Tommy approached them, dressed like some idiot from that Karate Kid movie. He was holding a red plastic cup and his eyes widened the second he saw July and Billy. On impulse Billy slipped his much larger hand into hers, giving it a tight squeeze. July didn't seem to notice as she squealed with delight as Tommy ran over to her.

"July! Holy shit! I didn't know you were coming!"

July let go of Billy's hand and ran to Tommy who gave her a tight squeeze. Billy rolled his eyes annoyed, before Tommy pulled back and laughed looking at July.

"This is officially the best party ever. How are you feeling? I haven't seen you in forever!"

July wrinkled her nose and made the "So-so" motion with her hand that Tommy instantly understood. He smiled gazing into her eyes before laughing.

"Still so cool to see you..."

His eyes then drifted over to Billy standing back, wearing his leather jacket, hands on his hips glaring. the second Tommy saw Billy he laughed, clapping his hands together.

"You brought Hargrove? Yes!"

He stepped aside from July and slapped Billy's hand.

"What's going on man? Great to see you. My cousin scored us a keg and we're seeing who can beat King Steve's record. You game?"

Billy instantly felt in his element. Any frustration from seeing so many guys hug and talk to his date was gone. This was his chance to not only show her and everyone else who was officially in charge, he knew this was some unspoken way to mark his territory. Grinning he nodded.

"Let's do this."

Tommy cheered as July smiled and the three of them made their way through the living room and outside onto the crowded back deck.

Later...

"Forty! Forty-one! Forty-two!"

July stood back amused as Tommy and the guys let go of Billy's legs, as he stood up breaking the new record for keg stands. He spit a mouthful of beer up into the air, as everyone went wild. Tommy cheered, absolutely losing his mind as he handed Billy back his cigarette. Beer trickled down Billy's muscular chest as he took a drag from his smoke before shouting...

"That's how you do it Hawkins! That's how you do it!"

He shouted, soaking in all the attention. July laughed, as Billy snaked a leather clad arm around her, drawing her close as Tommy led him back into the party to tell King Steve he had been dethroned. They all walked together, before approaching Steve and his girlfriend Nancy.

"We got ourselves a new keg king Harrington."

"Yeah eat it Harrington!"

Tommy and Patrick teased as Steve slowly slipped his sunglasses off and stared at Billy. July stood back, instantly frowning. She was good friends with Steve and saw the sting in his eyes as Billy looked him up and down and grinned, before squeezing July tight and walking

away. Teenagers followed him as if he was a God.

"Want a beer?"

Billy asked, leaning in close so she could hear from the noise. His breath smelled of beer and cigarettes. Smiling, July shook her head.

"I'm good. I can't drink remember? I'm gonna run to the bathroom. I'll be right back..."

She pulled away from him, making his way down the hallway. Billy stood back amused, before Tommy distracted him by dragging him into the kitchen for shots.

In the bathroom...

July stood at the sink after using the bathroom and washing her hands. She looked at her pale reflection in the mirror, hearing the loud booming music from the other side of the door. Her head throbbed, but she grasped onto the counter, shutting her eyes and trying to do her breathing exercises. She would be damned if a little headache would prevent her from actually enjoying herself. She was with Billy, who despite what kind of front he tried to put on, was actually really cute. She knew what people were saying, maybe it was a pity date? Maybe they were screwing? Still, when Patty and Jessica talked with her outside while Billy and those other idiots were doing keg stands, they begged to know details.

"So are you two a thing now?" "Do you like each other?" "You're neighbors right?" "He's so cute!"

Usually questions like this would annoy July to no end, but for once the glances, the stares, the questions, and the whispers weren't about how sick she was. She knew just from what people had said at the party that Billy had quite the bad boy rep. Still, he had been decent to her, and the way she saw it...if she really didn't have long, why not have fun? There was a knock on the door breaking her out of her thoughts.

"Um, just a second!"

She heard Billy's deep voice on the other end, purring through the

door.

"It's Billy, let me in firecracker."

July smirked, before looking her eye makeup over, before turning around and opening the door. Billy stood in the doorway smirking, holding a soda can. July saw his eyes looking her over, before he softly laughed.

"Gonna let me in?"

July smiled stepping back before Billy shut the door behind him, leaning against it.

"May I help you?"

Billy smiled before cracking open the Pepsi and handing it over to her.

"Figured you were thirsty. Tommy and the guys did victory shots with me."

July laughed before holding up three fingers.

"Really? How many fingers am I holding up Hargrove?"

Billy smirked before offering her the can. July smiled taking it, before bringing it up to her bright red lips and taking a sip. Billy watched her very closely, his eyes intense. July caught him and offered him the can.

"Want some?"

Billy stepped closer, looking down at her.

"Yeah...I guess I do..."

He leaned down, tilting his head before pressing his mouth against hers. The first thing he tasted was the smooth texture of her lipstick, and the sweet twinge of the soda. His mouth explored her, his tongue flicking against hers, before slowly their mouths opened and closed, starting to build up passion. July's eyes closed, as she felt the faint

scratch of his stubble against her skin. His breath tasted of beer and whiskey, but it wasn't exactly unpleasant.

She smiled through the kiss, as he continued, slowly backing her up against the counter of the sink. His hands wrapped around her by the waist, giving her a small squeeze, before his left hand slowly took hers that wasn't holding the soda. He took it by the wrist and slowly brought it down to the bulge of the front of his jeans that was beginning to form. July's tongue flickered again against his, before breaking apart. Slightly out of breath, and a small trail of spit escaping both of their mouths, both stared at each other flushed as well as surprised. July smirked before Billy stared down at her, his earring dangling and catching the light.

"Wow..."

"Yeah..." Both stared at each other for another second before they both burst out laughing.

3. A stupid goodnight kiss

July suddenly felt as if the inside of this tiny bathroom was a million degrees.

Billy had lifted her up, cupping her ass and placing her down on the bathroom counter. She very carefully spread her legs as he moved up between them, and wrapped his arms against her, keeping his bare chest flush against hers. His mouth was a frenzy of wet sloppy whiskey and cigarette tasting kisses. Everything was happening so fast. July gasped as his mouth traveled down to her neck, sucking and gently nipping at the tender skin of her throat. Finally a heavy knock interrupted them, and Billy growled under his breath before the same repeating knock came again.

"In a minute! Keep your tits on!"

He barked at the door, face flushed with frustration. July giggled, bringing her hands to her face to muffle the sound as she eyed the door. Billy rolled his eyes, looking back at her when suddenly his expression changed. His eyebrows were brought down, and suddenly those stormy dark blue eyes of his that were filled with so much passion flickered, and for a brief second she saw concern flash across them.

"Your nose..."

Instantly that copper taste filled the back of her throat as she sniffled and brought her thin fingertips up to her nostril. Touching it, she brought it back and saw the tiny beads of blood that had formed there. Instantly she frowned.

"Shit..."

"Here, hold on..."

She watched as he went over and rolled up a small wad of toilet paper, before bunching it in his hands. He walked back over while July was smoothing out her lace dress that had ridden up her thighs, and gave a small half embarrassed smile as he brought the tissue up

to her nose.

"Head back a bit..."

She stared half up to the ceiling for a second, before she sighed and brought her head back down, still holding the tissue up against her nose.

"Sorry I'm being such a drag..."

Billy gave a face.

"What? Never. You okay?"

July sniffled again and dabbed at her nose. Luckily the nosebleed wasn't a bad one. Sighing, she stared down at the tissue with little flecks of blood before Billy plucked it from her hands and tossed it into the toilet. Flushing, he turned and smiled, shoving his hands into his front pockets.

"You wanna leave?"

"I'm okay...really. Come on, let's celebrate your new reign as Keg King."

Billy gave a half smirk as she slid off the counter, pulling on her dress to keep down before opening the door. The sound of blasting music filled the air, as Nancy stood, her white sweater stained with some red juice. She looked pretty cocked. For just a second Nancy and her locked eyes, before she felt Billy move behind her, slipping his hands around her waist and giving the side of her ear a kiss. She smiled at how ticklish it felt and moved down the narrow hallway past Nancy and back into the living room. Tommy was waiting with a whiskey bottle and cheered the second he saw Billy. It looked as if the next round of shots had all ready been poured.

Later...

"Nobody drives my car but me..."

Billy slurred as he leaned against the side of the car. July laughed, now wearing his heavy leather jacket draped over her shoulders. She

usually would laugh at how ridiculous this looked. Just him with his muscular chest in the middle of a chilly October night, looking like some male model with his dirty blond hair, light blue eyes, and crazy good looking body. Instead of laughing she thought back just a few minutes ago when they had decided to leave. Even though she could tell the drinks had just started catching up on Billy, he still took the time to pause and slip his jacket off before draping it over her shoulders as they headed back to the car. She could see some of the girls watching and practically drooling. Now they were back at the car, fighting over who should drive.

Billy was cocked, but leaned against the side of the car, shaking his head telling her he had driven ten times more wasted before and he was totally fine. Knowing regular logic and reason wouldn't get through to him, she thought for a second before grinning.

"I'll give you a surprise when we get back if you let me drive."

Billy now looked interested.

"Oh really? Well, well, well...if the firecracker ain't showing off her true colors huh?"

July smiled, waiting for him to finally make up his mind. After a few seconds of lingering eyes, he laughed and pointed to her.

"Left pocket of my jacket. Just drive slow."

July fished into the pocket, passing a package of smokes, before hearing the faint jingle of the keys as her hands wrapped around them and she pulled them out. Smiling she walked over and unlocked her door as Billy circled around to the passenger side. Before getting it, he whistled at her, making her pause before climbing in.

"Hey firecracker?"

July paused looking at him. Billy gave a drunken half smile, trying to hold back from laughing.

"I...can't fucking wait for my surprise."

Laughing, July shook her head.

"You're too much..."

With that both climbed in and July started the engine. Seconds later, the car packed up, and turned around headed for the main road. Steve, who had just gotten into it with Nancy stood on the porch trying to get some air. Just then Tommy clapped him on the shoulder.

"Ready for a beer my man?" Steve gave a sad half smile and shrugged.

"Naw, I gotta get Nancy out of her, she's really wrecked."

Tommy, who was pretty wrecked himself looked across his lawn and followed the direction of Steve's gaze and saw Billy's rear lights disappear in the darkness as it turned left. Chucking to himself, he shook Steve's shoulder.

"I wouldn't worry about it Steve. July is a big girl...she can take care of herself."

Steve sighed, still watching before shaking his head.

"Yeah...I guess so..."

Later...

July carefully drove Billy's car towards their neighborhood. The radio was softly playing, and Billy had rolled both windows down to get some "air" July told him if he felt sick to just tell her so he wouldn't puke in his car. Instead he smirked, popping another smoke in his mouth and told her he never got sick from drinking. In fact, he wasn't even buzzed. July glanced over giving him a look, before pulling into their street. Rolling up to Billy's driveway, she asked if it was okay if she parked on the street.

It was late, and she didn't want the engine waking anyone up. Billy said sure, and finally they parked, listening to the engine slowly tick down and cool, before the two looked at each other. Billy smiled and motioned across the street.

"Can I walk you?"

July looked out through the window and pretended to chew on her lip looking worried.

"Gee...I don't know...it's so far away..."

Billy chuckled, shaking his head before yanking the door open and climbing out. July followed, keys in hand, carefully shutting the door before Billy met her on the other side of the car. Smirking, he offered his arm. Taking it, the two walked across the street, their boots clicking against the pavement, as they started to climb the driveway. Once they reached the porch, July dug into her purse for her keys, before fishing them out.

"Well, thanks for the night out. Really had a ton of fun."

Billy. smirked, staring down at her.

"Don't mention it."

July then laughed, starting to slip his heavy leather jacket off her shoulders.

"Jesus you must be freezing..."

Billy stopped her, gently placing his hand on his shoulder.

"Hold onto it."

"But..."

Billy stared down at her, clearly drunk, and looking as if he was having fun with her. Staring, he smiled, before cocking his head to the side.

"I saw you looking at me. You think I have a nice body don't you?"

July's eyes drooped, slowly looking up and down his chest. It was almost comical how crazy buff he really was. Seeing him just standing there on her chest bare-chested, she stiffened a small laugh, before Billy smiled stepping closer.

"What's so funny firecracker?"

July felt her cheeks starting to burn with heat, before she glanced across the street at his house.

"Say...aren't you scared you're parents are gonna flip seeing you so wasted."

Billy looked back over his shoulder at the house almost disgusted before sighing and looking back at her.

"I've done it hundreds of times, besides they are all ready asleep and I don't get hangovers."

"Really? Lucky...Mr. Keg King."

"So...since I let you drive, where's my surprise?"

July laughed as she turned slightly, unlocking her front door, and gently pushing it open before standing in the doorway.

"Man Hargrove, you don't forget anything."

Billy chuckled, before staring down at her, using his hand to lean against the doorway as he stared down at her.

"So? Where is it?"

July held up one finger to show him "one minute" with that she reached back into her purse, before fishing out her lipstick. Billy watched, raising an eyebrow as she uncapped it, and carefully applied it to her lips, putting a shinny top new red coat on her lips. Capping the lipstick and placing it back into her purse, she smiled before staring up at him. Billy then rolled his eyes, looking off to the side.

"What? A stupid goodnight kiss?"

July smiled before flinging her purse back behind her into her house where the sound of it landing made a faint clatter. Two seconds later, she reached for the plunging neckline of her lace dress, and pulled it down. It took Billy a second, before his eyes shifted back over and he saw her. Instantly his eyes widened in complete surprise, staring down at her pale, yet perfectly round breasts. July smiled, loving

seeing his reaction.

"Don't look so surprised Hargrove, it isn't a good look on you." Billy laughed, before stepping closer.

"Kinky firecracker...I think I could like this..."

He leaned closer, before tilting his head and gently staring kissing her. Smiling through it, July strained on her tiptoes, as Billy's hands snaked in through his open leather jacket on her, and found both of her breasts. Instantly, he moaned through the kiss as his hands found them, and began to roughly grope them, his fingers running over her rock hard nipples, as his tongue plunged down her mouth, making loud hungry sucking sounds. Just then headlights lit up behind them as a car started slowly driving down the street. July's eyes widened, as she grabbed into Billy, trying to pull him backwards inside with her. Right away their feet became tangled, and Billy felt himself falling forward against her.

"Whoa!"

Both fell backwards, crashing hard against the inside rug laid out in the hallway, Billy falling on top of her. Within seconds, both laid together as whatever car it was continued driving way unaware of what they were passing. Billy looked down at July laying underneath him. Instantly his eyes widened, knowing he was laying all of his weight down on her.

"Jesus Christ! Are you okay? Did you hit your head?"

He actually sounded concerned, ready to jump off her, when he was greeted by an actual really pleasant sight. July's face was red as she started cracking up. Staring down at her as if she was insane, he took a second, before a smile twitched at the side of his mouth, before he started laughing himself. Both laid there, him on top of her on the floor, before she reached up and wiped some smudged lipstick on his bottom lip. Still calming down from the laughter, Billy smiled, before leaning down, tilting his head and began kissing her again.

The next morning...

Billy's long eyelashes fluttered open, greeted by the early morning light coming in through the curtains. It took him a second, before his eyes adjusted to the light and the strange surrounds. He wasn't in his new bedroom, no...this was new. His mouth felt like sandpaper as he blinked again, feeling just a faint headache from the drinks the night before, nothing a beer wouldn't take care of. He shifted his weight to the side, and saw he was laying on the sofa in July's living room. Both of them were still dressed, and crammed together spooning on the sofa. He was laying on the inside, with July sleeping curled up beside him, the back of her lace dress up against his bare chest.

Taking a second, Billy tried to think back on the night before. He remembered them making-out, but that was it. He knew they hadn't of had sex, just some heavy petting...which was a first for him. He looked down, watching her slowly breathe and smiled. This was the first time...since ever that he spent the night with a chick and didn't screw her. Carefully he lifted himself up, his messy hair falling in his eyes, before he slid off the sofa, trying his hardest not to knock into her.

Once he stood, he cracked his back, before looking down at her. She really was pretty... Eyeing his leather jacket on the chair, he smiled before lifting it up and carefully placing it over her like a blanket. She muttered in her sleep, before turning over, his jacket still covering her. Smiling, he shook his head, tempted to lean down and give her a kiss on the forehead. Instead that same stupid voice inside of him said it was stupid and to just go. Staring down at her for just another second, he smirked, before turning and quietly walking out, shutting the door behind him. The early October air greeted his bare chest as he broke out into goosebumps.

Thankful his father had said something about looking for car parts with a guy he just met at work, he saw his car missing from the driveway. He never checked in on him, and assumed that his car parked outside he had spent the night home. Not that he really cared anyways... Crossing the street, he climbed the steps to the house, before yanking the door open and walking inside. He could hear Susan downstairs in the basement doing laundry, and spotted Max reading comics in the kitchen. Instantly annoyed with just seeing her, he walked in and opened the fridge, grabbing a beer. Cracking it

open, and guzzled it down in three big gulps before burping loudly. Max glanced up disgusted. Billy leaned against the fridge staring at her. For a second he was tempted to ask her what comics she was reading? Instead he stopped himself knowing she might think he was trying to be friendly.

Instead he shot her a look.

"What?"

Max looked up and motioned to him.

"You...got lipstick...all over your face."

Billy reached and rubbed the side of his cheek, only to see his fingertips stained with the faint shade of red that July had worn last night. Smirking, staring down at his hands, he thought of her the way he left her on the sofa, and how good her body felt pressed against hers. Seeing Max still staring at her, he shot her another look before turning, still carrying his beer.

"Get stuffed loser..."

He ignored Max flipping him off as he returned to his bedroom, kicking the door closed behind him. Feeling himself starting to sweat, he planned on taking a nice cold shower, and spending the morning jerking off to the image of July he now had cemented in his mind. Smirking, he figured he would lift some weights, and maybe after take another visit across the street. July wasn't like most girls, not even the ones from back West. No, something was different about her, and Billy couldn't believe he was thinking of this, but he actually really liked her. Still, he didn't like the way those guys, mostly that dip shit Steve had looked at her. He wasn't looking for anything serious, but he knew that needed to stop right away. No matter what.

4. Boyfriend and girlfriend

That afternoon...

"Billy! Telephone!"

Billy was currently in the middle of lifting weights. He had showered, and had finished his beer before catching another few hours of sleep. Once he woke up, he dressed in jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, before going about her chores in case his father came home early. He mowed the lawn, thankful that it was still early and cool out. He pulled some weeds, checked the gutters, and unpacked a few more boxes for the garage. All the while Max rolled back and forth on her skateboard, not doing a single thing. Once he was finished he checked the oil in his car, before going back in and decided to lift some weights. He figured he might take a ride later, but was currently enjoying not feeling dread in the pit of his stomach, having to walk on egg shells by having his father home.

He knew no matter how much he did, or staled out of his way somehow Neil would find a way to get on his case. He could find something he did wrong, ripping it apart, calling him lazy. He would harp on whatever he forgot or should have done without being reminded. If he did so something extra without being asked like clean the gutters, he would complain he didn't do it right. He would call him names, bring up that this move was because of him after all, and he wouldn't let him forget it. He would get in his face, even if he tried to avoid him. He would say he was being a smartass, and as if Susan was his audience, he would need to show what a tough guy he was by shoving or hitting him. So, for those few peaceful hours he lifted weights, not listening to music, just focused on his breathing, enjoying the faint burn of pain deep inside his muscles. He stared ahead at the wall, lifting the barbell, puffing on a cigarette, lost in his thoughts. He wouldn't think of his mother, or Mrs. Morgan.

He wouldn't think of all the fights, or problems he had caused. No, today he just stayed numb, lifting the weight, breathing in and out slowly as he continued to smoke his cigarette. Maybe one day if Neil went too far like before he would be ready...

"Billy?"

Susan stepped into the side room holding the telephone, the cord snaking through the door that opened up into the kitchen. Billy snapped out of his thoughts, before nodding, really having no idea who it could be. He had taken a few girl's numbers, but hadn't given his out yet. Still, it had been a pretty big party last night, maybe that asshole Tommy, or Patrick had looked him up, being little followers, wanting to hang out. Billy turned, putting the barbell back on the rack, before stubbing out his cigarette into the plastic ashtray that sat on one of the end tables. Walking to Susan, he nodded and muttered a thanks as she handed him the phone. Taking it, he entered the kitchen as Susan went back to unpacking glassware to put into the cabinets. Leaning against the wall, he put the phone up to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey Billy. Wanted to thank you for the good time last night."

For a second Billy felt confused, before within seconds he recognized the voice, and a grin spread over his face.

"Hey firecracker, how are you?"

Susan eyed him, but continued unpacking, pretending she wasn't listening in. Billy, not really eating, chuckled, hearing her smoothy smoky voice on the other line. He had had plenty of girls call him up before back in California, all eager, and going on and on over the phone, gushing about any upcoming date they had. Somehow this felt different. Billy couldn't explain it. He was actually smiling, feeling his tongue run over his lips as he heard her laugh, telling him she was fine, but awfully disappointed when she woke up this morning to find him gone. He listened as she thanked him again for bringing him to the party, how she was basically going stir crazy being held up in her house for so long with only her tissues to keep her company.

Billy laughed, feeling that same strange fluttering deep within him, before he eyed Susan who had her back to him. A little annoyed, he turned slightly, lowering his voice as best as he could.

"How you feeling?"

"Eh, so-so. My mother won't be back until tomorrow. I was wondering...if you might be interested in swinging by. I'm gonna order a pizza for dinner and was wondering if you wanna rent some scary movies."

Billy smirked, rising an eyebrow.

"Scary movies huh? You like that stuff?"

"Love them. Have you seen The Entity?"

"No...any good?"

"Super disturbing. I know it's a Sunday but...if you want maybe after you eat dinner or something you could swing by the video store, just give my name I have an account there and come by around six if that's okay?"

Billy smiled, mentally noting to pick up a pack of condoms at the 7-11 from downtown as well. Smirking, he ran his hand over his stubble covered chin.

"Yeah sure, I'll see you then."

"Cool, see you then. Bye."

"Bye firecracker."

He hung up, before running his tongue over his lips, before laughing to himself. He would shave real quick, and get into some fresh clothes, before heading out.

"Susan?"

"Yeah?"

"Dad having dinner with us tonight?"

"Um, no...he called he won't be back until late."

"Well, I'm gonna grab a pizza with July from across the street."

Susan smiled.

"The Criss girl? Awe that's so sweet. Did you guys have fun last night?"

Billy, who usually wasn't used to speaking this much with his stepmother shrugged.

"Yeah. I guess so."

Susan smiled, before Billy was ready to walk out, when Susan called after him.

"Yeah?"

"Does...she seem sick?"

Billy couldn't explain it, but standing in the doorway he suddenly felt anger bubbling up in the pit of his stomach. Instead, he stood there, biting down on his lip.

"What do you mean?"

Susan sighed, holding a glass that was half wrapped with some faded newspaper.

"Mrs. Criss said she's starting her third round of chemo in a few weeks...they are hoping for the best, but I guess she's in an awful lot of pain. She seems really sweet...but does she seem sick?"

Billy suddenly felt uncomfortable hearing this. The girl last night who had pulled her dress down to him, and had kissed him wasn't sick. So she got a few nosebleeds? She seemed perfectly fine. He shrugged.

"She seems fine."

Before Susan could say another word, he walked out, feeling his hands curl into fists.

Later...

July answered the door, wearing drawstring shorts, and a faded T-shirt. She had spent the better part of the morning on the phone with her mother reassuring her that she felt perfectly fine. She didn't

mention the nosebleeds, or how bad her headaches were getting. She mentioned how she met the kid across the street, and even went to a Halloween party thrown by Tommy H. She danced across details, leaving out the drinking, and how late they really stayed. In fact, she made it sound more like some stupid kiddo party held in Tommy's parent's den.

Her mother actually sounded pleasantly surprised that she had gotten out, and for just a few hours was able to act and even feel for a little bit like a normal teenager. Not one that lived basically in hospitals, hooked up to wires and tubes, violently ill, and doped up on medication. No, just hearing her voice over the phone, July hated herself for what she had put her mother and father through. Her mother deserved a healthy daughter who went to school, dated, and had friends. Instead she had to watch July get weaker and weaker, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on medical bills. Spending countless hours, days, and even months at the hospitals.

Dealing with the tests, the surgeries, the stink of hospitals and illness. For these few minutes her mother actually sounded happy. She asked a little bit about the party, and finally about Billy.

"I saw him, he's really cute. What's he like?"

July laughed holding onto the phone.

"He's...interesting. Has this whole bad boy image with the hair, and the car, and the attitude...but I think it's just really a front."

Her mother laughed.

"Reminds me of your father when we were younger."

July laughed, curling her finger around the rubber phone cord, and spent the next few minutes laughing with her mother, soaking in that sound, knowing as time crawled on, she would hear this noise less and less.

After she hung up, she went to her bathroom upstairs, and took out her pain pills. This latest headache was a real winner, and her vision was beginning to blur. She shook out two and ran the faucet, before

cupping her hand and washing the pills down. Looking at her reflection, she hated her pale she looked, including her lips. Grabbing her eyeliner, she attempted to jazz herself up a little including grabbing some lipgloss. She hated her complexion, and how bloodshot her eyes got whenever the headaches got this bad. Sometimes what the doctor called a "blood ring" would form around her eyes. So far, she seemed okay today.

She messed with her hair again, a choppy bob, before drawing it back again with a few pins. Looking at herself she sighed. It wasn't much, but it would simply have to do. She joggled downstairs and ordered the pizza. While waiting for it, she took a look around, cleaning up any used tissues of hers, and tossing them in the wastepaper basket underneath the kitchen sink. The pizza guy came, and she paid, before laying the box on the coffee table along with some paper plates and napkins. Tapping her foot, clad in black peds, she looked around feeling the pills begin to take hold. Smiling, she messed with her hair again, when suddenly she heard the sound of the bell. Smoothing out her T-shirt, she gave herself one last look over in the mirror that hung in the small narrow hallway that led to the stairs, before going to the door. Answering it, she pulled the door open to find Billy standing there. He wore jeans, a white T-shirt, and denim jacket. He had two plastic video tapes in one hand and his mother resting on his hip.

July couldn't help it, but her eyes went down, and scanned the crotch of his jeans. She was certain he didn't shove socks down that, and the outline she saw pressing firmly against the fabric of jeans, dangerously bulging against the gold teeth of the zipper. He stared at her, eyes looking cloudy with sexual tension.

"Hey..."

His voice was deep and rich sounding. July felt color rise in her cheeks as she smiled, before she motioned for him to come in.

"Come on in..."

As he stepped in, she could faintly smell cologne, an intoxicating smell. Smiling, she watched him walk into the living room, enjoying the full of his ass as he turned, catching where her eyes had been.

Instantly, both stared at each other and laughed.

"Got the movies, found the Entity, and The Evil Dead."

"Oh my God that one is so good! Have you seen it?"

"Yeah, pretty messed up stuff..."

He smirked as he laid the tapes down by the pizza box, before placing his hands on his hips and grinning. July nervously smiled back at him.

"What?"

"How did you get my number?"

"My mom I guess wrote it down, it was on the fridge when she met your step-mother."

Billy nodded, mentally checking the two condoms he had tucked away in the front pocket of his jacket along with his smokes. He took in her long legs that came out from the shorts. She seemed to have shimmer tights or something underneath them, making her skin look smooth, and sexy. Whenever he saw women wearing this it drove him mad. Smiling, he slipped his jean jacket off, before draping it over the chair. Right away July's eyes lit up.

"Oh! I have your jacket..."

Billy waved his hand.

"I told you, hold onto it..."

He then made sure to flex his arms as he gently rolled up the sleeves of his T-shirt, showing off his tanned muscular arms, enjoying the expression on July's face as she watched him. Stepping closer, he smiled. July stared up, and softly gulped. Standing less than an inch away from her, he stared down as July felt her heart hammer in her chest. Billy closely stared down at her. Right away his eyes locked with hers.

"You're stoned aren't you?"

"Huh?" Billy laughed and danced his large thick fingers in front of her face and continued staring down at her intensely.

"I can tell by your eyes...what are you on? Grass?"

July suddenly felt embarrassed before shrugging.

"Just pain meds for my head...these damn headaches..."

Billy continued staring at her, before July nervously chewed her lip.

"You...want one?"

"Naw, I'm good. Keep em for yourself...say I know what's the best cure for a bad headache."

"What's that?"

Billy reached down grabbing her wrist, before bringing it to the crotch of his jeans. July stood there, feeling her breath catch in her throat. She could feel something beneath the fabric of the jeans pulsing underneath there, a firm bulge forming there. Feeling tingling down below, she took a deep breath, before smiling. This wasn't like her, not at all. She wasn't the type of girl to do this. She knew Billy wanted one thing, and one thing only. Still, between the pills, and hearing her mother's voice sounding so happy on the other end of the phone earlier, all she wanted was to throw caution to the wind, and just have fun.

Billy leaned down and began frantically kissing her, his hands firmly gripping onto her. Slowly they moved up and down, before one snaked up her T-shirt, finding she was wearing just a sports bra. His thumb grazed the nipple, before covering the smooth round mound of flesh. He leaned down, his mouth opening and closing, as his tongue plunged down into her mouth, hungrily tasting her. July stood on tip toes, reaching up and yanking at his tangled hair. Both moaned through the kiss, before Billy's hands reached down and with one swift motion yanked down her shorts. July laughed through the kiss, before he smiled, and saw she did have tights on, but no panties. Deciding to really take her off guard, Billy reached down and scooped her up, carrying her to the sofa. July squealed with delight,

as he carefully laid her down on the sofa.

"Scoot up a little and spread your legs..."

July didn't take her eyes off him as he reached down and peeled his T-shirt off, flinging it to the side.

"Billy..."

He ignored her, as he reached down, gently touching the sensitive part between her legs, covered by just a shimmery see through nylon fabric. She threw her head back slightly, as he cupped the area with his larger hand, and rubbed right over her clit, sending spark waves through her. Gasping, she twisted and turned on the sofa she spent so many countless nights staying up watching the Late Show between her parents. What they would think, knowing what their little girl was doing on this piece of furniture now... She panted, as he watched her, his eyes direct and serious. Finally, he reached down, and ripped a hole in the tights like a madman. Excited, and very turned on, July reached up and ran her hands over his chest.

"Billy...wait..."

Billy stopped, still kneeling between her two legs, ready to reach up into the hole he had torn in her tights. Looking at her, he have a side smile.

"Don't tell me? You're a virgin..."

"No..."

She shook her head. Billy laughed, still running that damn tongue over his bottom lip.

"Yeah sure..."

"No really, I lost it about two years ago."

"Don't tell me, with a kid who goes to another school..."

He teased, laughing, no longer caring what an asshole he sounded like. July shot him a look, scooting up a bit, but not exactly sitting.

"I lost it with my friend Steve. We both wanted to get it over with and since we've known each other our whole lives, we decided to just do it."

Billy's expression fell.

"Wait...Steve as in...Steve Harrington?"

July nodded, really not feeling the big deal.

"Yeah, so?"

"You two just fucked?"

"Yeah, two years ago. We're just friends, we didn't mean anything. Besides Steve is dating that Nancy chick now."

"Have you slept with anyone else since then?"

"No, why?"

Billy looked angry for a second, before July laughed and shrugged.

"Hey, sorry that I needed to give you a full background check. I like you Billy, and I think you're super attractive...It's just...I just met you, clearly we both don't believe in wasting time, and God knows I've learned life is short...I just wanna mess around a little bit tonight if that's okay. If it isn't, sorry..."

Billy continued kneeling there for another second before a small smile appeared on the side of his mouth. He took an second, before shaking his head.

"Harrington huh?"

July smiled back up at him.

"What? Don't like him?"

"Well, I'll have to show you what a real man feel like soon then. No way that kid could have been any good in the sack."

July threw back her head, cracking up completely, before Billy shot

her a look. "What?" "You're jealous." Billy gave her another look.

"What?!"

"You're jealous."

"No fucking way, we just met..."

"You're jealous...I can tell."

"No, just trying to figure out why you would wanna lose it to such a dork like Harrington?"

July laughed.

"Upset you weren't going to be my first Prince Charming?"

Billy glared at her, but knew he couldn't stay angry. He never had a girl speak to him like this before. Finally a small smile came over his face again.

"So, princess...how does one get into these shinny torn little tights of yours? Well...besides being a nerdy basketball player like Harrington?"

July giggled, before Billy leaned against the sofa, still shirtless. He ran his hand through his hair, looking down at her.

"I'm serious, if you aren't ready yet that's cool I guess...but you aren't a tease right?"

"Billy!"

Billy laughed.

"Really?"

July crossed her arms and pretended to be deep in thought.

"Well...I guess, the guy would have to be my boyfriend."

Billy gave a look.

"Boyfriend?"

"Yeah you know...girlfriend boyfriend. I know to a guy like you probably doesn't 'date' let alone girls he just met."

"Whoa, what makes you say that?"

"I heard from the girls at the party, you're the new stud at school. I'm poor pale and sick July. You want a healthy girl to screw, a girl that isn't high as a kite on pain pills, and actually have good circulation..."

Billy rolled his eyes.

"Sounds pretty dramatic..."

July suddenly stared at Billy, no longer joking.

"I mean it Billy. I'm all for having a good time, but I'm really sick..."

"You don't seem sick..."

"I am, and things get really intense. We can mess around, but we shouldn't think of anything serious. You deserve to sleep with girls that are healthy, that you can take to parties, that aren't getting nosebleeds and headaches every two seconds..."

"What if I told you I'm not interested in those other cockteases...what if I wanna date you?"

July rolled her eyes.

"You're just horny..."

"No, I mean it...I'm all for messing around, but we'll take it anyway you want. I'll date you."

"Bullshit..."

Billy smiled reaching down, before grasping her by the wrists, pulling her closer to him, lifting her slightly off the sofa. He brought her closer to him, before his nose was less than an inch away from hers. Both laughed, before he cocked his head to the side.

"So you wanna?"

"What? Screw?"

July started cracking up before Billy rolled his eyes.

"No, date...do you wanna...be my girlfriend?"

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Are you just doing this to get into my...tights?"

"Well yeah...and I think you're a pretty cool chick."

"Listen, I'm being honest though, I really am sick though. We can mess around...I just don't want you to feel..."

Billy cut off her words by pressing his lips against hers. Both smiled between their kiss, slowly opening and closing, before Billy pulled back, partly breathless.

"Have you? Ever gone down on a guy before?"

July smiled, pressing her forehead against his.

"I've just used my hands before on..."

Billy made a face shaking his head.

"Please don't bring up Harrington again."

July laughed, before Billy smirked.

"Well...as the first duty as your boyfriend, let me show you that pills aren't the only way to feel good..."

July raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Lay back and spread your legs wider."

July slowly did so, before Billy grinned, and lowered his head between her two spread legs. Within seconds her eyes widened, gasping as she clutched into the throw pillows behind her.

Later...

A box of half eaten pizza sat on the coffee table, as The Evil Dead played softly in the background. Billy sat on the sofa, jeans and underwear pulled down, pooled down around his ankles. He was shirtless, and despite the overhead ceiling fan slowly spinning above him, he was working up a good sweat. He had July kneeling in front of him on the floor. He had plunged his hands into her hair, and was grunting, holding her head in place as he gently bobbed up and down. For the last hour the two had taken turns fooling around. July didn't seem the slightest bit shy, but needed a little guidance with some things.

He was patient, since he honestly had never felt so turned on before in his life. He felt himself coming close as her wet mouth sucked and slurped up and down his shaft. Her tongue playfully tickled and flicked at the head of his penis, as one hand firmly held it by the stem, and the other cupped his balls. She had played with his penis, and was now currently giving him a blowjob to end all blowjobs. He tilted his head back, feeling himself touch the back of her throat, as her lips kept sucking, and applying more and more pressure. Feeling himself get closer, he sensed her head trying to lift up.

"Swallow it."

He told her, gently pressing her head down, as he twitched his hips up, before gasping as the tingling in his balls reached it's pressure point, and he moaned, feeling his penis twitch inside of her mouth, as he climaxed right inside of her mouth. July made a faint gagging noise, before her throat relaxed, and seconds later she lifted her head. The white liquid was dripping out of the side of her mouth in ropery strings. She looked a little flushed, as well as embarrassed before wiping her mouth, and gulping again. Billy sighed, catching his breath, before July wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and climbed up, sitting beside him.

"Wow...that was..."

"Absolutely fucking amazing..."

Billy finished her, before snaking his arm around her, and bringing her in close. Both stared at each other, before Billy smirked, planting a kiss on her forehead, before she laid her head against his bare chest. Gently rubbing her back, the two sat in silence watching the movie for a very long time.

Later...

Both movies had been watched, and the pizza had been all eaten. July was sprawled out across Billy, fast asleep, her shorts back on. Billy and her had made out for another hour, and he left some pretty nasty looking hickeys on her neck and collarbone. It had been a very intense night, but Billy had gotten off a few times, and had much satisfaction watching her come. He helped her, and had been patient. Now she was exhausted, and had fallen asleep on him. He petted her hair, finishing the movie, before glancing up at the clock on the wall knowing he better get home. He very carefully got up, laying her head down gently so he wouldn't wake her. Standing up, he looked down and smiled.

"Girlfriend..."

He thought to himself smiling. He really had never had a real "girlfriend" before, and this actually might be fun. Smiling, he grabbed his T-shirt and pulled it on. Before grabbing his jean jacket, he then noticed something and frowned. He saw blood starting to bubble up in one of her nostrils as she continued peacefully sleeping, dribbling down her nose. Sighing, he plucked a tissue from the box on the end table, and very gently wiped her nose. Softly she muttered in her sleep, but didn't wake up. Looking down at the blood stained tissue, he felt that same strange twisting feeling in his stomach. Looking down at her, he sighed, before leaning down, kissing her forehead, before grabbing his jacket, and leaving, careful not to close the door too loudly.

Once he was outside, feeling the cold October night air, he started across the street. Unaware, he was starting to smile.

5. Sharks and blood

Later that week...

Billy had the telephone cradled against his shoulder and ear, lightly chuckling as he spoke with July for the past hour. This was now a nightly routine after they saw each other. Billy would usually cross the street after school, and the two for the past week would spend a few hours together. That Monday he met Mrs. Criss, after July asked if he wanted to stay for dinner. Billy who usually wasn't into meeting families, decided to say "screw it" and agree to come over. The smile that spread across July's face was worth it, and Billy went home to change. Having never met a parent before, he was a little puzzled on what to wear. At first, he wanted to say he didn't care, another part of him was curious on what July's mother was like, and figured he would just lay on the same Billy charm that so often worked with older women. Sticking with the jeans he wore at school, he grabbed his dark red button up short sleeve shirt, and buttoned it up all the way, which wasn't his usual style. He messed with his hair for a little bit, before finishing his third cigarette. That's when it hit him. He was nervous. He rolled his eyes, unable to believe himself. He had never been nervous, nor cared about what some parent thought. But then again, he had never been somebody's real "boyfriend" before. Whatever that meant. He was hoping July might make things a little bit clearer. Still, he really enjoyed whatever strange fluttering feeling he kept experiencing. Ever since last night he hadn't been able to get July out of his head. Last night he fell asleep still smelling her sweet scent, and tasing her on his lips. He kept thinking back to the expression on her face when he made her come, and loved having that sort of control over her. He played it over and over again as he drifted off to sleep, and was pleasantly surprised when he woke up with a pretty stiff hard-on that morning.

At school, word had traveled fast about the party, and everyone seemed to want to be his friend. Tommy had insisted he come sit with them at lunch, and more than enough girls giggled and waved as he strolled through the halls. Still, he couldn't stop thinking about July. On the way home he drove actually feeling pretty good about himself. He lightly drummed his fingers on the steering-wheel to the

beat of the Duran Duran song that played. Max glanced over annoyed. "Why are you in such a good mood?" Billy ignored her and kept driving. He had strolled across the street to say hi, only to start a pretty intense make-out session in the living room. Just as his hands started to snake up her T-shirt, she shoved them down smiling and informing him that her mother had been stuck in traffic, and would be arriving home very soon. She asked if he wanted to come back over for dinner? Now planning on heading over, he re-checked himself, feeling his palms sweat, before popping his head in on Susan who was preparing dinner herself.

"Um Susan?"

Susan looked up.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to have dinner with July and her mother tonight, I'll be home later if my dad asks..."

Susan lit up.

"Oh that's wonderful Billy...ummm...hold on..."

She turned and dug into the two brown bags she had brought home from the market just a half an hour ago. Billy stood back, slightly annoyed as he eyed the clock, not wanting to be late. Turning, she held a box of bakery bought cookies.

"Here, bring these over. Wish I had actually made something but the gesture will go a long way."

She handed them over and Billy looked down at the box, showing no reaction at all.

"Thanks..."

"Have fun, tell Mrs. Criss I said hi. If you want invite July over for dinner tomorrow, I'll make a roast."

Billy nodded knowing there was no way in Hell he would let Neil anywhere near July, before turning and walking out with the cookies.

He crossed the street, climbed the path, and rang the bell, trying to play it cool. Within seconds Mrs. Criss answered the door. She was a pretty older woman, maybe mid forties with the same shade of dark hair as July. She wore blue jeans and a plaid blouse. She smiled, eyes lighting up just like July's.

"You must be the Billy my daughter has been going on and on about."

Billy laughed.

"Yeah I guess that's me."

Mrs. Criss invited him in, and gushed over the box of cookies he brought, saying how sweet that was. Feeling slightly embarrassed, he smirked and said it was nothing before she invited him in. As they walked to the kitchen, she remarked that she had met his step-mother and step-sister and really wanted to thank him for keeping an eye out on July. Billy smiled as they entered the tiny kitchen.

"No problem it's been my...pleasure"

His words trailed off as he saw July standing in the kitchen currently standing at the tiny kitchen island, wearing a black pencil skirt, and navy blue blouse. Her hair was up, and she had large hoop earrings on. He stared at her thin little figure, and his eyes lingered on her throat, where she wore a white silk scarf to hide the hickeys had had given her. Earlier today he had given her two fresh ones just above her breasts. He couldn't explain it, but he was lucky starting to see once things were getting hot and heavy he had little to no self control. There was a hunger inside of him that needed to taste her sweet skin, and devour it. Earlier before he had agreed to come to dinner, he started to actually softly bite her, nipping at her skin, and feeling as if his hard-on was so strained against his jeans he might actually hurt himself. Seeing her, those same fluttering twisting feelings came back to him. He smiled staring at her, taking in the view before Mrs. Criss smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

"Please take a seat."

Billy offered to help but July teased they didn't have the local fire department on speed dial. Billy chuckled, as Mrs. Criss brought him a

can of soda, before they came with the salad and bowls. Mrs. Criss was curious about Billy, asking him about school, Max, and California. Billy stayed vague, but Mrs. Criss seemed cool enough, knowing where not to push. She was easy going, and actually really funny. Billy loved watching the little banter that went back and forth between July and her, and instantly saw how close they were. The main course came, and Billy actually felt relaxed. During the entire meal, he kept looking across at July and catching her eyes. Whenever Mrs. Criss wasn't watching, Billy would make faces at her, causing her to giggle. During the course of the meal Billy learned that July's father was often away flying jets and was due back at the end of the month. That July's birthday was July 7th, originally due on the 4th, which explained her very unusual name. They had a good amount of family down state. Mrs. Criss asked about school, and Billy shrugged, he said it seemed okay, and was currently trying out for the basketball team since he dabbled it in a little bit back home. Mrs. Criss asked him what else he liked doing, and he mentioned surfing, and talked a little bit about his car. Mrs. Criss actually seemed interested, and during the meal made Billy remember what dinners used to be like with his mother before things got bad with his father.

He used to love nights where Neil was working late, where it was just him and her, eating frozen dinners, laughing, and looking at comic books at the table. Watching Mrs. Criss with July, he felt a strange tug in his chest, knowing deep down inside, he missed his mother. Once dinner was over Billy insisted on helping clean up. Mrs. Criss thanked them and told Billy it was great meeting him and he was welcome to come over whenever he wanted. She then poured herself a glass of wine and told July she was going into the living room to watch her stories. Together, July and Billy washed the dishes, sleeves pushed up, as they stood side by side washing and drying. Once they were finished, July motioned up the backstairs.

"Wanna go upstairs for a little bit?" Drying his hands on a dishcloth, Billy smiled. They climbed the back stairs, holding hands, before going into July's bedroom. Billy right away found himself unable to stop smiling. It wasn't a typical teenage girl's room. In fact, it kinda reminded him of Max's room. The walls were painted a dark navy blue with gray trim. There was a full bed in the center of the room, with a framed poster of Jaws above of the bed. There was a dresser

with a vanity, a jewelry box, and a desk. Billy saw on a glass tray at least eight or so different bottles of pills, most of the names he couldn't recognize. He saw pushed over to the side, hidden slightly by a rocking chair covered in scarfs, hats, and even Billy's leather jacket was a small oxygen tank. He could see there were tiny little pieces of evidence that she was sick, but that was it. He placed his hands on his hips, looking around, faintly smelling lavender. There was her closet door, and her bathroom door with a mirror hanging off it. He strolled over to the window, pushing back the dark blue curtains and spotted his own house across the street with the lights on. He figured his family would be sitting down to dinner now, the tension thick enough you could cut it with a knife. Happy to be there instead, he turned and saw a tiny shelf. There were books, a few snow globes from different tourist traps around the country, as well tiny plastic and rubber sharks.

There were all kinds, hammer heads, great whites, tiger sharks, all kinds. He picked up a few, smiling and looking at them, before he felt July's smooth hands slip around his waist, and hug him from behind. He felt her rest her head against his back, before giving his back a soft kiss.

"I know, stupid kid stuff..."

Billy laughed, looking at another shark.

"Don't tell me? You like whales?"

July laughed, before she nudged him towards the rocking chair.

"I still have your leather jacket..."

"That's your now, I told you that."

"That looks expensive, you might need it."

"Rather you have it..."

He lifted her hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing her slender fingers.

"Besides, it smells like me, you can have it on you whenever I'm not

around."

"Awww...what a good boyfriend."

Billy laughed before July let go of him, and went to her dresser. Opening her jewelry box, she dug inside it, pushing bracelets and necklaces away before turning, and holding up a dangling earring.

"Here..."

Billy smirked as she walked over, carefully standing on her tip toes, to unfasten his cheap tiny hoop earring, before putting in hers.

"Now you have something of mine..."

Billy smiled, touching it, before walking over to the hanging mirror off the bathroom door. Admiring it, he smirked, as she stood beside him. Snaking an arm around her, Billy brought her in close, kissing the top of her head.

"Hey, what are you doing tomorrow afternoon?"

"I have a doctor's appointment in town."

"What time?"

"Two."

"How far away is your doctor's office from the high school?"

"Less than five minutes."

"Can your mom drop you off at your appointment and then walk to the high school?"

"Yeah, I can do that, why?"

"I got basketball practice, around three. If I meet you in the lot, all I gotta do is drop my step-sister off then head back. If you don't think it's a total bore...maybe you can watch me play?"

July smiled.

"Am I your good luck charm?"

Billy looked a little embarrassed.

"I mean I get it if you don't want to..."

July smiled standing on her tiptoes again before she leaned in close to him, softly whispering and smiling.

"I would love too..."

Billy smiled before wrapping his hands around her waist, making her squeal, as he threw the two of them backwards on the bed. Laughing, July laid beside him, when Billy stared at her, suddenly his eyes becoming very intense and dark.

"Climb on top of me...hike your skirt up."

July made a face.

"Billy my mom is downstairs..."

"Shhhh, it's not what you think, just do it...trust me."

July smiled, before slowly and very carefully climbing on top of Billy as he laid there. Slowly she yanked her skirt up, nearly all the way up, revealing another pair of shimmery tights beneath. The second Billy saw them, he made a face causing July to crack up completely. Straddling him, he had her spread her thighs, spinning him down on each side of his hip. Laying there, both took deep breaths before Billy gently took her wrists, slowly bringing it down to the bulge of his jeans.

"Feel that?"

July stared down at him and slowly nodded. Billy continued making her hand rub up and down with more friction against the fork in his crotch. Instantly, she saw he wasn't wearing any underwear underneath. Instead, she saw a pretty good bulge forming there, going down the side of his leg. He stayed focused, staring up at her, breathing heavy. Feeling a good friction building up, he felt his nostrils flare, before he let go of her wrists, and took hold of her hips,

Holding her firmly, he placed her down, before he began thrusting upward against July's spread legs, right against her sensitive center, with only the material of his jeans, and her tights separating them. It only took thirty or so seconds, before July's eyes began to roll back in her head, as she started to moan. as he grinded up against her, building up a good friction. Both continued roughly rubbing their bodies against each other, building up a sweat, as both started to moan. Within seconds July bowed her head, shuttering with a strong orgasm, as Billy grasped onto her, bucking his hips up once, twice, before climaxing in his jeans. The sensation of warmth faintly came up between his legs, as she collapsed against him, panting as she laid against his chest. Billy held onto her tight smiling, trying his hardest to get his breathing under control.

Laying there, Billy laughed, before kissing the top of her head.

The following day July met him in the school parking-lot as promised. She wore jeans and a blouse with a headband holding back her dark hair. Billy smirked seeing her, waving from the Camaro as he flicked his cigarette down. July walked over, holding her purse, before joining him. He smiled, staring down at her, still wearing her earring.

"Hey you..."

She smiled as she stepped closer and he leaned down, kissing her mouth fiercely, his mouth hungrily opening and closing against hers. Smiling through the kiss, she stepped back just as Max rolled up, holding her skateboard. She looked a little hesitant, before Billy rolled his eyes.

"Max this is July...July this is Max. You're riding in the back."

Max held onto her skateboard, looking at July with curious eyes, before July opening the passenger door and held the seat down for Max to climb into the backseat. On the ride back, Billy kept making excuses to sneak his hand over to July's side and touch her leg. Max watched, rolling her eyes. July was friendly enough, asking Max how she liked school? If she had made any friends yet? And, what was her favorite video game to play at the arcade since Billy mentioned she liked being dropped off there. At first Max kept her answers brief,

acting slightly moody, before finally July got her to warm up, acting surprising her by knowing a little bit about video games herself.

"My parents bought me a Nintendo system last year since I'm stuck in bed. Ever play duck hunt?"

Max smiled slightly, tucking her red hair behind her ear.

"Once, I wasn't very good."

"You should totally come over and help me beat my high score one day. I hate whenever that jerk dog pops up sticking his tongue out."

Max and July laughed as Billy glanced over, not showing he was amused at all, even though deep down inside, he fought back a smile of his own. Once Max was dropped off, they scooted back to school. Billy casually asked how her appointment went?" July shrugged and said they went over some labs, and are thinking about starting another round of chemo after the holidays. Billy gripped the steering-wheel, suddenly sorry he asked. Glancing at her, he saw she was picking at her nails.

"Is that what you want?"

July shrugged.

"I think that this point it's a bit of a waste, tumor has grown, and the changes of the chemo shrinking it aren't very high. I went through chemo twice and it's awful. Makes me super sick, I lose a bunch of my hair, I'm stuck in bed...why spend whatever time I have left doing..."

Her words trailed off, seeing Billy looking at her.

"Sorry..."

Billy shook his head, before reaching over and taking her hand, giving it a soft squeeze, he brought it up to her lips and kissed the top of it.

"Those doctors don't know shit. You're going to beat this thing and tell them to shove the chemo right up their asses."

"Billy...I know we just started...whatever this is, but...things might get pretty intense. I don't want you to feel like you have to..."

Billy shot her a look, this time, his eyes angry.

"What did I all ready tell you? I'm not a piece of shit...remember?"

July sighed, before knowing she better change the subject.

"Well, I feel honored to watch my new boyfriend play basketball. Do all the girlfriends of the players watch?"

Billy grinned, playfully giving her a shove, mentally storing in the back of his head how frail she felt when he did that. He didn't like this talk of brain tumors, of chemo getting too serious. They were just having fun. She was perfectly fine, and today he was going to make sure she saw how good he was at playing ball. A million times better than that asshole Steve. When they arrived at the gym, she sat at the bleachers, actually recognizing a few girls who sat on the bleachers, holding their books. They all squealed with delight when she came over, remarking that they hadn't seen her in forever. Billy grinned, before going to the locker room and changing into his green gym shorts. Once he walked out, he saw much to his delight he would be playing against Steve. He had heard about that chick Nancy and him, and was going to take much pleasure sweeping the floor with his sorry ass, proving not only to everyone on the team he was the new king of this shit hole high school, but that he was a million times better. He wanted July to watch and see. He was happy his team was skins so she could see his body flexing and lighting sweating. When he dribbled the ball he winked at her, causing her to blush as she sat with the other girls.

As he eyed Steve, he felt a horrible surge of jealousy fuel through him. Why did this little piece of shit get to be July's first? Using that anger to his advantage, he played the best game he had played in weeks. All the while, keeping his eye on July who cheered for him by the stands. Now it was the end of the week. Since then, he had seen her every night. He had promised to invite her soon to his house for dinner, even though he wanted to spare her from Neil. Yesterday it was her idea to go treat Max for ice cream downtown. Even though he thought it was a total drag, he agreed and took them, standing

back watching as Max and her laughed carrying their cones. He had come over every night at her house after dinner, and the two of them as always landed upstairs on her bed, making out, always leaving his balls aching, and his need to have her get more and more intense.

They always called for a few hours, laughing, and talking about absolutely nothing. He knew this drove Neil crazy, who had all ready snapped twice for him to hang up the fucking phone. He had taken her for a few rides in the car, and so far besides a few nosebleeds and headaches didn't see what all the fuss was about? She seemed perfectly fine. He wanted her to come over tomorrow after he came home from school, he wanted to show her how good he was at lifting weights. She laughed at this, but agreed, and he knew as soon as he got introducing her to Susan and Neil, he would have more time just with her to himself. He hoped this heavy petting and make out sessions were leading up to something bigger. He had never jerked off so much to one girl before it seemed insane. She wasn't his typical "type" but he suspected if there was such a thing as falling, he was falling for her pretty hard. She said her goodbyes since her mother was taking her to see her aunt tonight. He hated not being able to go over here, but had made her promise on coming over tomorrow. Before she hung up, he didn't even think and muttered...

"Okay firecracker, I'll see you tomorrow...love you."

The words stuck in his throat and his eyes widened.

Love you...

He couldn't believe how stupid he was that he said that. Wasn't girls supposed to be the forward sappy ones? He shut his eyes mentally cursing himself. He heard a slight pause on her end, before her voice filled the line.

"I'll see you tomorrow...love you too...bye."

She hung up, and he was left holding the phone. She didn't sound weirded out at all, in fact...she actually sounded happy. Staring at the phone, he smiled, knowing things were going way to fast, but honestly at this point he didn't care. With that over with, maybe they really would sleep together soon. God knows July was the first girl he

ever said that to. Smiling, he rolled his eyes at himself, before hanging up the phone. He glanced out the kitchen window, and saw July and her mother climb into her car, before it backed out and headed down the road. Watching it, until it completely disappeared, he couldn't believe how stupid he was acting? Like some dumb school boy in love. Still, this week somehow Neil's name calling, and shoves hadn't really hurt as bad. His few hours each day spending time or talking with July had made him higher than any drug had ever gotten him buzzed.

Maybe he did love her? He smiled, figuring he would spend the rest of his night lifting weights since Neil and Susan had gone out to a dinner and a movie and weren't planning on getting back until late. With Max to look after, and July gone for the night, he told her no way he was letting her go out with her little loser friends. She could read comics or watch TV, but no going out. He was on his way out of the kitchen when he suddenly heard Max scream.

Pausing he lifted an eyebrow, before listening again. This time he heard her crying. Hurrying to her bedroom, he tried the doorknob and found it locked. Instantly thoughts of those little pricks trying to scare her and get her to sneak out flashed before his eyes.

"Max?"

He called, loudly hammering his fist against the door. No answer.

"MAX! OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR!"

Still no answer. Feeling his heart hammer in his chest, his face became drawn down, ready to kill either her, or one of those weirdos she had been hanging out with. Backing up slightly, he slammed his shoulder against the door. In mere seconds, it buckled from the doorframe, and swung open, nearly spilling Billy inside. What he saw, stunned him as he stared with wide blue eyes. Max was in her PJ bottoms and was holding the pair of jeans and a blood stained pair of panties in her hands. Large fat tears rolled down her freckled face. Looking at him, stunned he had broken in, she screamed.

"Get out!"

Billy saw the crotch of her jeans were stained with blood as well. Instantly he wanted to die. Why of all nights did this little bitch decide to start her first period? It wasn't like he could call Susan or July? No, lucky him...he was her babysitter.

"Jesus Max..."

Max shrieked, throwing down her blood stained clothes, before rushing past him and going into the bathroom off to the end of the hall. Slamming and locking the door shut, he heard her loud sobs from the other door. Looking down at the clothes disgusted, he rolled his eyes before rubbing his chin and walking down the hallway, not exactly sure what to say or do.

"Hey...Max...you...like know what this is right? Is it your first?"

"GO AWAY BILLY!"

Billy sighed, rolling his eyes, this was honestly the last thing he needed. Shaking his head, he tried a different approach.

"Um...listen...your mom won't be home for awhile now...and um...July is gone with her mom...you don't have to be embarrassed or anything. All girls like get it..."

"Go away Billy...just go away!"

He heard from crying even louder. Knowing it was his ass if he didn't do anything. Billy took a deep breath running his hands through hair, and hated that this was suddenly put right in his lap to deal with. Sighing, he knew he would get shit if he didn't help her deal with it. Sighing again, he knew that maybe tonight might be his once chance to actually be a half way decent step-brother. He just honestly didn't even know where to begin...

6. A decent brother

Author's note - Hey guys thanks for all of the killer reviews! You guys rock!

Billy knew he had to think fast.

As much as he felt embarrassed, he knew she must have been humiliated. Deciding to push aside whatever feeling he felt over how gross and stupid this was, he knew he needed to do something for this ungrateful little brat, even if he didn't want to. Taking a second to cool down, he took a deep breath, before lightly knocking on the bathroom door.

"Hey Max?"

"GO AWAY!"

She shrieked at the top of her lungs. Having her voice cut right through his head, he held back the urge to shout back at her. He had to remind himself she was scared, as well as very embarrassed. He knocked again.

"Max, listen...it's okay. Hasn't your mother ever talked about this stuff before to you?"

There was silence, before he could hear the faint sound of her sniffing and weeping on the other side of the door. Actually feeling halfway sorry, he remembered the first time he got his first hard-on. He was eleven, and it was shortly after his mother took off. Things hadn't completely gone to Hell yet with his father yet, even though he was barley around. He remembered it was a Saturday morning, and when he woke up he felt it tightening and pressing against his inner thigh like a broom handle.

Instantly he remembered thinking was wrong with him. It remembered having trouble sitting up, and instantly the frightening thought that something was wrong with him and he might need to go to the hospital. Thoughts of his father getting angry with him, or even worse...what if they had to cut his thing off?! In pure panic, he

limped around his room, near tears before finally after a half an hour of crying and sweating it finally went down. It wasn't until the next year that he connected the dots on what exactly caused this, and how good it could feel if you touched and rubbed it.

Remembering that stupid panic and fear that raced through his mind, he knew he needed to help Max, even if he didn't really like her, or felt it was his responsibility. Taking a deep breath, he gave another gentle knock.

"Max, now don't fucking yell. I'm gonna come in. You don't need to be embarrassed..."

"NO!"

"Max please..."

"I want my mom..."

"She won't be back until later and I bet you don't want Neil seeing. Now wrap a towel or something around you and open the door. I swear to God I'll break it down if I have to..."

There was a long pause on the other side of the door, before finally he heard the lock click open, before the doorknob slowly turned, and Max stared out at him with bloodshot eyes. Big fat tears were spilling down her freckled face. She lifted her eyes, looking at him, lower lip quivering. Part of him wanted to lay it on thick as Neil often did. Tell her to stop being such a pussy. That even Tomboys like herself got on the rag. Instead, looking at her frightened eyes, he took a second before sighing.

"Don't start screaming and slam the door in my face, I'm just trying to help."

"I want my mom..."

"Yeah well, she isn't here, so let's deal with it, let me in."

"Billy..."

Billy ignored her and pushed forward. Max still had on her PJ

bottoms and quickly ran to the toilet and flushed. Billy saw tiny dime sized flecks of blood on the white toilet seat. At first he wanted to feel disgusted, but instead watching her realize they were there, she ran over, bunching a bunch of toilet paper, and wiping it before flushing again. She missed a few drops on the tile floor, but Billy knew this wasn't important. He crossed his arms and leaned against the door.

"Do you know what this is?"

Max sniffled and shrugged, cheeks flushing. Billy sighed, rubbing his chin feeling his scratchy stubble, knowing he needed to shave. Just the other night July said she would love to see him with a beard, but she throat was getting all scratched up and she would love to see him all baby-faced and smooth. Max nervously stood by the sink before her eyes nearly snapped shut as her arms circled around her waist and she held her stomach. He knew these were cramps. He had gone with enough chicks to know the ins and outs of girls being on the rag. Hell, he had even banged a chick back in California when she was on it. It had been messy as Hell, and he felt pretty grossed out afterwards. Still, it was totally normal. July had told him with all the medications she was on, she stopped getting hers about five months ago. She said she had to take pills to give her the right amount of hormones, but this was really the only perk of having all of these treatments and having to be on all these pills. Billy thought all the better, this meant he wouldn't have to wear a condom when they actually got down to doing it, unless she really made a big deal about it.

He knew every other time he would tell any girl that gave him that much grief to take a hike, but with July it was different. He couldn't explain it, but as much as he hated to admit it...if July asked him to jump through hoops to make her laugh, he would do it without a second thought. Anything to see that beautiful smile. Billy sighed.

"It's your period. Have you learned about that in school yet like in health class?"

"We're supposed to soon, a few girls in my class have it...my mom said I probably wouldn't get mine for another year or so like her."

"Yeah well, surprise Max, you're having your first period."

Max's lip quivered again as she nervously chewed it.

"Maybe I'm not...maybe it's..."

"Trust me Max, it's your period. Now don't freak out, it's not like in Carrie where you think you're dying and end up murdering your whole school."

This acutely made Max smirk, letting a small laugh escape from her mouth. Billy instantly felt at ease, and was grateful for that tension breaker. Last year, right before the movie and everything going to Hell, Max had rented Carrie one night Billy was forced to watch her. The two watched it and Max burst out laughing at all the nudity in the opening scene. Max had rolled his eyes, trying to cover her eyes and the two actually ended up rough housing. By the end of it, both were exhausted, and laughing.

This was one of the few times they actually got along. They had watched the whole movie, and by the end Max was laughing and screaming. Getting her to laugh, he knew he needed to act fast, before she lost her nerve and started crying again.

"You're mom can explain it better, but all girls get it"

"Like July?"

He thought of the endless plastic containers of pills, and felt a knot in his stomach. Instead of confusing her anymore, he smirked and said yeah, exactly. He saw she was listening, and decided to tell her at least what he knew.

"I'm no health teacher, but it happens, along with other stuff. Guys have different shit happen to them too, it's just part of growing up."

"Like your voice getting deeper, and growing a beard?"

"Yeah and getting hard-ons."

Billy had to bite the insides of her cheeks from laughing and he shrugged.

"Yeah, now I'm no chick, but this is the biggest thing. Talk to your mom and she'll break it down for you...but once a month you're gonna bleed. Now I know it lasts a few days and why your stomach hurts is cramps."

Max, almost as if reminded of the pain, held her stomach again.

"It really hurts Billy..."

"That's normal. Now it lasts a couple of days and all I know if you gotta keep clean and have stuff..."

He went to the sink and squatted. Opening the lower cabinet, and saw Susan had a box of tampons. There was no way in Hell he was going to be able to explain how to use these things to his sister. He knew a lot of girls wore those pad things. He moved a few things around, praying he could find anything, instead he came up with nothing. Frustrated, he shook his head.

"Of course..."

He stood up, hearing his knees pop as he shut the cabinet and turned to Max.

"Grab a towel, and one of your sweatshirts, we gotta go to the mini-mart."

"No!"

"Max, we gotta get you stuff, besides your cramps are gonna get worse, we'll get you something to help your stomach."

Max thought about this for a second, before sighing and nodded.

"Come on, remember the towel and tie the sweatshirt around your waist, we'll be quick."

He walked out ahead of her, knowing he needed to grab a pack of smokes. The faster he got this over with, the better. As he walked back to his bedroom to grab his jean jacket, he mentally wished July was here with him. More than anything in the entire world, he wanted his girlfriend with him.

Later...

He knew Max was embarrassed so he allowed her to stay in the car. She had laid the towel down on the passenger seat , and had the sweatshirt tied around her waist. The entire ride over, she kept wrapping her arms around her waist, leaning against the door, pressing her forehead against the cool glass of the window. Billy played the radio softly, and drove, not even attempting to talk to her. Once he got to the mini-mart he told her to stay put. At this point if he ran into anyone at school, he was ready to knock their lights out if they commented on what he was picking up. He was really not in the mood, and the thought of curling up in bed with July, wrapping his arms around her thin smooth body sounded like pure Heaven.

He entered the min-mart, and saw the bored older guy behind the counter reading the newspaper. He grabbed a basket and it took him a minute, before he found the feminine hygiene second. Pushing aside his pride, he went into the section and scanned the light pink and baby blue boxes. He really had no idea what he was looking for. He saw a package of pads, and saw they were over night ones. That must have been good. He grabbed them, before noticing the special aspirin designed for women with cramps. He didn't want to get into trouble for giving Max anything too heavy, but figured this would be fine. he tossed them in, before he crossed to the next aisle and stopped. Smirking, he walked down it to the freezer section and looked through the frosty glass windows. He ended up picking out two quarts. One cookies and cream, the other banana fudge. He also grabbed two cans of Tab. He knew chicks loved ice cream when they were on their period and figured treating the little brat to something extra might cheer her up. God knew she had a rough enough night. He then saw the tiny video store section and smirked.

He knew Max loved horror, just like July. He looked over the titles, before picking up *The Fog* and *The Howling*. He went to the counter, and got two packages of smokes as he rented the videos and paid for the rest. He was grateful the old man didn't even pause for a brief second when he was checking out the pads. Instead he rung up the total and Billy paid cash, having him bag everything. Pocketing the change, he went back to the car and got behind the wheel. Max looked pale.

"I think I'm bleeding through my pants..."

"Don't worry, we'll get you home fast, but here...take these..."

He reached into the bag and grabbed the bottle of aspirin for the cramps. He used his teeth to open the bottle and shook out four blue pills. He figured that would be enough, and handed them to her. Max took them in her open palm, and stared down puzzled, cocking her head to the side.

"What are these?"

Billy reached into the bag again and grabbed a Tab and snapped it open, before handing her the can next.

"Here...it's just something I picked up in there, I bet your mom has stuff like this. It's like heavy duty aspirin, it's for cramps. Just swallow them and I bet your cramps will ease up."

Max looked hesitant, but ended up taking them, and sipping the soda. She softly thanked him, as Billy poked a smoke in his mouth, and started to drive home.

"Sorry Billy..."

She whispered.

Billy glanced over.

"For what?"

"For all of this."

Billy shrugged staring forward

"Whatever."

Max nodded, and continued sipping her soda. By the time they pulled in, Billy took the bag and watched as she wrapped the towel around her waist, double checking the passenger seat before slamming her door. They went inside and Billy motioned to the bathroom.

"Okay, grab some PJs and underwear, all your dirty clothes kick out into the hallway."

"Billy..."

"Do you want my dad to see or what?"

Max sighed, eyes filling slightly with tears before she shook her head.

"Okay, this is what you are going to do. Take a quick shot shower, clean yourself up, when you get your clothes on...this is what you're gonna do..."

He reached into the bag and took the pads out. He wasn't the slightest bit sure how these even worked. Instead of letting on, he was just as much in the dark as her, he tore open through the top of the box, and took one of the pads out. He unwrapped it as Max turned every shade of red. A fresh cigarette dangled from his mouth.

"Okay...um...we'll just use this one to show you. Use a fresh one...so you take it out of it's wrapper..."

He did so, and couldn't believe how long this looked. It was going to end up feeling like she was wearing a damn diaper.

"Unfold it, and um...put this in the crotch of your clean underwear. After like an hour or so you peel it out and DON'T flush them! That's like the one thing I know..."

He wasn't about to tell her he knew this from having once screwed a girl in the girl's room of a club in California and he saw signs all over the trash saying not to flush tampons or pads since it would clog up the plumbing. He knew if this little shit ended up being stupid enough to do it, somehow it would be his ass.

"Um, you wrap it up and throw it out and put another one in...like I said Susan can fucking show you but get clean clothes first and toss the dirty ones in the hallway."

"Billy...I can just throw them out."

Billy rolled his eyes.

"Just toss them outside, Jesus Max..."

He turned, planning on putting the ice cream into the freezer, and lighting another smoke while she showered. He was just as embarrassed as she was, and needed something to settle his nerves. He thought about the pot hidden in the trunk of his car and thought better of it. Max quietly thanked him and went to her bedroom. Once she came out she had fresh clothes in her arms, including the box of pads. Billy watched as she went into the bathroom and moments later the door opened a crack and her dirty soiled clothes were kicked out. Billy put the ice cream in the freezer, and walked to the hall puffing on a cigarette. Part of him was grossed out, the other part of him felt bad. The poor kid really was a Tomboy and had no idea what she was doing. He figured she was lucky this happened here instead of at school. He remembered in the 6th grade it happened to a girl who of course was wearing a white cotton skirt.

He hated to admit it, but he was one of the many cruel boys who teased her to no end when she stood for lunch, only to discover a large blood stain on her skirt.

Girls certainly didn't have it easy...

He scooped up the clothes, and went into her bedroom, before grabbing her other dirty clothes. He had every night to hate her, to make her life a living Hell. He didn't like her, but he knew if he hadn't of death with this, it clearly would have been his ass. He grabbed the handful of clothing, went downstairs to the basement and pulled the string for the hanging light bulb. He went to the washer, and knew Susan could take over once they dried. He was a master for getting blood out of clothing after countless years of Neil beating the ever living shit out of him, and having to clean his own clothes before anyone noticed the tiny blood stains from either a bloody nose, or busted lip. He grabbed the laundry soap and poured it directly over the blood. He felt super weird when he held her underwear, but tried not to think about it. The blood there had been the worst, but if he washed it with hot water it might come out. Besides, Susan would be home to finish it once the buzzer went off to change into the dryer.

Twisting the dial, he shut the top and waited before the kid hugging

began to echo throughout the dark musty smelling basement, still stacked up with unopened boxes from the move. He jogged upstairs, just as he heard the shower stop. He prayed she could figure out the pad. The last thing he wanted was to go in there and show her how to put it in her underwear, Once he went into the kitchen, he opened the freezer, and grabbed two spoons before going under the sink and grabbing the rubber hot water bottle Neil often filled up for his back. He turned the sink on until the water was steaming and filled up the bag before capping it.

He heard the blowdryer for a few minutes, before he grabbed the tubs of ice cream, and ventured to the living room. He brought in the cans of soda as well, and shook out another two aspirins. He knew Max couldn't OD and for this being her first period he might as well feel as numb as can be. He clicked on the TV, just as Max entered. Her hair was back in a ponytail, still slightly damp. She wore a baggy T-shirt and plaid clean PJs. She walked a little funny, and he figured it was because she had to get used to how to walk with that in her underwear. God knows he probably bought it too big. Still, better than nothing. Maybe this would teach Susan to actually talk to her daughter and give her a heads up to this kind of shit. God knows it shouldn't be the seventeen year old stepbrother's job. Max walked in and nervously stood in the doorway.

"You okay?"

Max nodded.

"Yeah...thanks Billy."

"Billy nodded.

"Clothes are in the wash. Now your mom probably won't be home for another hour. I say take another pill, and help me destroy this ice cream while we watch your choice. The Fog...or The Howling?"

Max stood puzzled for a second, almost expecting Billy to snap at her. Instead he sat back, puffing on another smoke, clearly his nerves shot. She cracked a small embarrassed smile and shrugged.

"Well, the Howling of course, the effects in that are super gross."

Billy smirked and got up, popping it into the VCR.

"Good choice."

Max sat down on the sofa. Usually the two of them fought like cats and dogs. Mostly since the move. He had been extremely moody, and had voiced his concern on her hanging out with the boys, mostly Lucas. This had caused a lot of fighting, and as tempted as Max was to have told her mother about Billy acting crazy nearly hitting the boys, she kept her mouth shut. God knows her ratting him out had caused enough problems. Still, every once in awhile, even though he was a moody asshole, it was times like this that he was actually really cool. He hadn't made her feel bad or embarrassed about this at all.

She had seen the change in him ever since he started going out with July. Opening her ice cream, she passed for a second, before taking the other two pills and gulping them down with her soda. The pills had helped a great deal, since the cramps had been so and, she honestly thought she was dying. Now she was tired, and ready to just space out and take her mind off things for a little while. This was just yet another reason why she hated being a girl. The boys never had to worry about stuff like this... Billy sat down as the tracking on the tape adjusted, and the opening logo began to play. Billy grabbed his spoon, before smirking and diving it into hers. Max laughed, giving him a playful nudge with her shoulder.

"Hey!" Billy smirked, before both started eating ice cream, watching as werewolves transformed with drooling fangs.

Later...

Neil and Susan came home, both a little buzzed from the wine at dinner, laughing and walking in. Both stopped when they looked into the den, and saw the rare sight. Billy and Max were on the sofa. There were two empty containers of ice cream in front of them, with spoons laying inside. The TV was blue having run out of tape, and Max was curled up against Billy, her head resting against his shoulder. Billy slept, head tilted back. Susan smiled, feeling her heart warm by the sight. She honestly wished she had a camera. It was so sweet to see, mostly since they hadn't been getting along lately since the move. Neil mumbled something under his breath, and shuffled off

to bed, not caring. Susan meanwhile smiled looking down at them. Hating to wake them, she leaned over, and gave Billy a gentle shake. Slowly his long eyelashes fluttered open and he stared up.

It took him a second, before he blinked, fully waking up.

"Susan, you just get home?"

"Yeah, your dad just went to bed. You two have a little movie night?"

Billy blinked looking a little confused, before eyeing Max laying against him. He smirked, before rolling his eyes.

"Um..." He made sure his voice was low.

"Susan...Max started her period tonight."

Susan's face dropped.

"Oh no..."

"Yeah, she was pretty freaked out. I got her to take a shower and clean up, and went to the mini-mart and got her some stuff but I'm not sure if it's the right stuff..."

"Oh Jesus Billy I'm so sorry..."

Billy shrugged.

"It's okay. I don't think I did a good job explaining things, but I bought these..."

He motioned with his boot to the coffee table where the pills were.

"She took a few for the cramps. Hope that's okay?"

"Of of course!"

"Her clothing is in the wash, I just figured you would wanna talk to her..."

Susan looked touched.

"Billy, again I'm so sorry you had to deal with all of this, but thank you. Let me give you some money..."

"Billy shook his head, before turning, and giving Max a little shake. She muttered in her sleep, turning, trying to bury her face against his shirt.

"Go away..."

She muttered. Billy smirked, and gave her another shake, this time she woke up, just like Billy blinking, confused, before looking over at her mother.

"Mom?"

"Hey baby, you wanna come into the bathroom with me for a second?"

Max's face dropped, before she nodded.

"Yeah...sure..."

She got up, before turning slightly and looking down at Billy.

"Thanks Billy..."

"No problem kiddo."

Susan smiled, and walked Max down the hallway. Alone, Billy used the remote to shut the TV off, before grabbing the cartons of ice cream and tossing them, before washing the spoons and putting them away. That's when he looked out the kitchen window and noticed July's mom's car was back.

Grinning, he got an idea...

Outside...

Billy was careful to circle around the house. He looked up at July's window, knowing she kept it open every night. Smiling, he knew this was stupid, but after the night he had, he just wanted to see her. Looking at the tiny roof of the kitchen, he grinned, before grabbing

hold of it. He pulled himself up, thankful for his upper body strength, and prayed no cars would be driving by at this time of the night and think he was breaking in. Lifting himself completely, he was now at chest level with July's bedroom window. Smiling, he cupped his hands to try and see her laying in bed, hidden by all of the shadows of darkness. He squinted, before he saw her. She was laying in just a baggy T-shirt, sleeping. He also noticed she didn't have a bra on. Licking his lips, he lightly tapped on the window. July tossed for a second, before he knocked a little louder, praying her mother down the hall wouldn't hear.

Finally, she slightly sat up, hair messy but adorable. She blinked, looking a little confused, before she spotted him and her eyes widened. She laughed, and even though the glass, it was a sound he had missed, even for just a few hours. He waved at her, motioning for her to let him in. She laughed again rolling her eyes, before getting out of bed, tossing back the blue comforter. He saw the T-shirt ride up a little, revealing black panties. He all ready felt himself getting worked up as he smiled. She walked across the carpet floor, before lifting the window, and ducking her head underneath.

"Hey Peter Pan, what are you doing out here?"

"I had one HELL of a night, mind letting me in?"

July smiled, before reaching forward, grabbing him by the shirt, and dragging him in, Both laughed as he nearly fell.

Later...

Both laid together in bed. Billy in just his boxer briefs, and July in her panties and T-shirt. They hadn't done anything besides make-out and do some heavy duty petting. Currently Bill held her in his arms, while the other hand had snaked up and cupped the perfectly round mound of soft flesh. He laid there, smelling her sweet scent, having just finished telling her all about Max.

"You're a good big brother Billy..."

"Stepbrother..."

"That was still really sweet Billy. You just gotta ease up on her, most of all with her friends..."

Billy made a face, ready to argue, before July rolled over slightly and looked at him smiling. She leaned down, kissing his bare chest.

"I wanna tell you something..."

Billy raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"I wanna go...you know...all the way with you."

Billy's eyes widened as he smiled.

"Now?"

July made a face playfully swatting him.

"No ding-dong...next Friday night. My mom is gonna be out, and I wanna have sex with you..."

"You mean it?"

"Yeah...if you still want to?"

Billy laughed, wrapping his arms around her tight, firmly kissing her on the lips. He knew he had fallen pretty hard for July, and once he got to have sex with her, there would be no turning back.

Unfortunately the days leading up were bad ones. Billy's temper was getting worse when he saw Max a few days later in the parking-lot upset from Lucas arguing with her. Since the night with her getting her period he felt protective of her, but wasn't able to display it the right way. His jealousy knowing Steve had sex with July before drove him mad and he began to target him, and finally when the big night happened, Billy got ready, messing with his hair, spraying cologne even down his pants, eager, and excited to be inside of July, Neil and Susan discovered Max had snuck out...

"Call whatever whore and cancel the date..."

He knew July's name, and often made fun of it. Now he was calling her a whore. His sent his temper into overdrive. Before leaving he picked up the phone and called July, frustrated, and near tears.

"July, I gotta find Max...I'll be over after..."

"Do you want me to come?"

"No, let me just deal with this little shit...then I'll be over. I promise."

"You okay? You sound funny..."

"I'm fine baby...just give me an hour, I'll find her. I'll swing by after."

"Okay, Mrs. Kitter is gonna swing by, she's gotta borrow my mom's crockpot. I better change out of this silk nightgown before she swings by. She might think it's for her..."

Billy smirked, wanting so badly to laugh, but hated Max and his father for this. What he would do to be across the street right now...

Closing his eyes, he sighed, before grabbing his jacket he had borrowed back from July and grabbed his keys. He better find this little shit soon, and make her pay for ruining his special night with July... Unknown to him, July hung up the phone, dressed in a sexy dark blue silk nightgown with lace panties and bra underneath. She had candles lit, and had the whole evening planned. Still, she knew something was wrong.

Billy sounded as if he had been crying...

She figured it was his dad, who she had only met in passing. Billy was just starting to open up about his Homelife, and it didn't sound good. Plus, she was beginning to notice the bruises on his body, and knew they weren't from basketball. She wanted to confront him, but figured if she pushed he might shut down completely. Sighing, she had just talked to her mother's friend who would be over soon for the crockpot. Now she just needed to grab a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, before finding the crockpot in the kitchen.

She hung up, before noticing her hand felt numb. She looked down at it, as a terrible headache began to zap through her. She walked two

steps, before her eyes rolled back into her head, and she fell down onto the hardwood floor in a heap. Instantly, the seizure began to take hold as she convulsed, shaking violently on the floor. Billy, unaware that the love of his life was having a seizure just across the street, started down the street, planning on hitting Lucas' house first.

7. Someplace safe

Billy ended up hitchhiking back, knowing with his car gone that little bitch must have taken off with that Harrington prick and those other losers. His ribs ached, as did his back. He held his side, before limping out to the main road. He was tempted to use the phone at the house to call July, but thought better of it. Instead, his pride, and body were hurting, and whatever drug Max had injected him in was just starting to wear off. He had no idea how long he had laid on the living room floor passed out, but when he did wake up, everyone was gone, and all he could taste was blood. It had been forever since he lost it like that, but his tempter yet again got away from him. He hated those little pricks, and hated that Harrington was with them. He knew what Max was thinking. He didn't like this nerd Lucas because he was black. No, that couldn't have been more further from the truth.

He didn't two shits about skin color. He had overheard the two of them arguing this week in the school parking-lot, and ever since the night he helped her with her period, he felt a sense of duty to protect her in his own way. Instead she gave him attitude, and mouthed off to him. This resulted in more arguing, and him snapping Max's skateboard one afternoon when he caught that she had been lying to him and had been at the arcade with those kids. She just wouldn't listen, and had this huge attitude suddenly. Neil's temper had been awful lately. He didn't understand what had triggered it, but it seemed as if Billy even breathed in his direction Neil would completely lose it. He had started slapping him around, reminding him about respect and responsibility. He told him that all he did was mouth off, drive around in his car, and go see that girl across the street.

Billy tried to reason with him. He did all his chores, helped Susan out, took care of his car on his own (by selling weed on the side, which wasn't anyone's business, and his father never asked how he came up with the insurance or gas money.) and drove Max anywhere she wanted, having to put up with his big mouth. He was certain Susan had told him about what he did for Max that night, but to Neil it meant nothing. Just the other day after Billy had changed his oil filter, he wheeled out from underneath his car, wiping his hands on a

rag when he suddenly was greeted by Neil standing above him, holding a can of beer and grinning down at him. Right away he knew something was wrong. "So I hear Max has been playing with some local boys. You been watching her?" Billy raised an eyebrow.

I all ready told her too..." Neil then raised his boot and brought it down on the crotch of Billy's jeans, pressing the heel of his boot against Billy's penis and balls, knocking the wind instantly out of him. His eyes widening, he got out a gasp as Neil grinned, keeping the pressure down against his groin.

"Now, I thought I told you to keep an eye out on her. I'm all for Max having friends, but you make sure none of them are taking advantage...or it's going to be your ass."

Billy could have explained himself, try to tell him that he had been warning her. Instead, he just gasped for air as he lifted his boot, chuckled, and walked away. Billy laid there for a second, holding himself, and gritting his teeth. He fought back tears, not understanding why the responsibility of Max fell on him? The afternoon that he brought her back from the arcade, Susan and Neil were still at work. Max had been mouthy, and Billy was having enough. He popped another cigarette in his mouth and he took the opportunity to play his music in the empty house as he lifted weights. July was at another appointment, and he kept thinking of their special night coming up, and had never felt so excited about anything in his entire life. He was going to make sure it was perfect for her, and she would never even think of that little asshole Steve again.

"I don't get why you care who I hang out with? It's none of your business!"

"Actually it you little shit."

"Why do you care who I hang out with?! I don't care or keep bringing up that the only girl you could get is somebody who's dying!"

As soon as the words escaped her mouth, Billy saw her eyes widen in regret. Billy's hand itched to slap her. Instead, his eyes narrowed, and he snatched her skateboard. Max took two shaken steps back, actually frightened. Billy held the skateboard and glared at her. Max

opened her mouth.

"Billy...I didn't mean it...I'm..."

Billy held onto the skateboard and leaned down slightly.

"Listen here you little shit. I'm gonna let that one slide since you still might be moody from being on your rag, but don't you ever talk about July like that again. She's been nothing but good to you. Maybe it's your new friends teaching you how to mouth off like that."

With that, he snapped the skateboard, making a huge crack split down the middle of it. Max's eyes said it all, as she stepped back, looking as if Billy had just snapped the neck of her puppy dog or something. Glaring at her, he tossed it down with a loud clatter as it hit the wooden floor, and shot her a look.

"Say a word to you're mom or Neil and one of your little friend's arms will be next..."

He went to start his workout as Max gathered her skateboard stunned. She grabbed duct tape from the garage and tried to repair it, when the doorbell rang. Billy knew when she came back acting all nervous it must have been one of her stupid little friends, better yet it was probably Lucas. Now here he was, having gotten harassed by Neil in front of Susan, humiliated, and then having the ever living shit kicked out of him. The drugs made him feel cloudy, as he held onto his side, knowing if he came back without Max and without his car Neil was going to kill him. No punches, no shoves, he was going to kill him. First he would take one look at his face, and start on him losing a fight.

Then, he would go into one of those white flashing rages, he would kill him...right in front of Susan, and that would be the end of it. For the longest time he actually hoped this would happen, at least that way the pain would stop. But with July in his life, he knew he didn't want to die. For the first time in years, he actually had somebody he cared about. An old man in a prick-up truck picked him up, a little drunk himself and didn't seem to notice Billy's busted up face. He said he could take him to his street, and listened to some old 60's rock radio station, all the while taking sips from his flask. At one

point he offered Billy the flask, and Billy decided to say screw it and ripped some back. The hot whiskey burned his stomach, but actually felt pretty good and helped with the ache inside his side. He mentally made a plan. He would sneak into July's, and ask her what to do? He would pray somehow his car could be returned. Maybe he would beg July to run away with him? He knew she was sick, but maybe he could convince her to leave with him. They would run for their lives, maybe head up to Canada.

He could find work and get her some good doctors. They could get a little place, maybe end up in a cabin somewhere. He would marry her, and take care of her. She would get better, and they would have themselves a couple of little boys...

He saw them approaching his street and asked to be let out here. The old man pulled over, before wishing him good luck.

"I would hate to see what the other guy looks like son!"

The old man cackled, and Billy forced a small smile, even though it pained his entire face. He thanked the man, climbed out and shut the door. Thankful for the cover of darkness, he limped up onto the sidewalk, holding himself as he dragged his feet slowly towards his street. His heart hammered in his chest, actually terrified if Neil was waiting for him. Once he passed the last house on Maple Drive, he paused and looked down his street in the direction of his house and instantly he felt his heart drop. A police car, and ambulance were parked right in front of July's house. He saw the bright lights of blue and red flashing, as neighbors were on their lawns watching. He saw his car back in the driveway, and the sheriff standing there with Max. He saw Neil and Susan as well. His eyes went to July's house, and right away he felt a cold grip tighten around his heart.

"No..."

He muttered before he took off running. He took off running straight in that direction, his boots slamming down against the pavement, as his legs pumped. He faintly thought he heard his father shout his name across the street, but he ignored it. Instead he ran up July's driveway, and into the open door, nearly sliding on the throw rug that was laid out when you first entered. He braced himself against

the wall, knocking a framed photo of July's grandparents off, which it shattered, and skidded to the side, seeing three paramedics all in the living room. July was laying on a stretcher, getting belted in, an oxygen mask over her pale face. She was wearing that silk nightgown she had mentioned over the phone, and a hospital brown wool blanket draped over her lower half. She had what looked like a monitor hooked up to her chest, connected by a large orange plastic suitcase that one of the paramedics was holding. She was pale, and her hair that had once been pinned up in a bun, just like Billy liked, was messy and half fallen around her face. A woman, the neighbor Billy suspected July had mentioned was standing off to the side, with July's mother who still had her jacket on, and was holding her car keys. She must have been called, and had raced home. She appeared to be calm, almost as if she was used to this kind of thing. Billy stood there frozen for a second, as a police officer who was outside hurried behind him.

"Hey!"

July's eyes fluttered open and she spotted Billy. She instantly tried to move, but the paramedics told her to keep still.

"Billy..."

She said beneath her fogged up oxygen mask, struggling as the paramedics and now her mother tried to tell her to lay back. Billy walked towards her, as the officer tried to grab him. Billy was so tense he was ready to knock somebody's lights out. Instead Hopper, the sheriff walked in, looking tired.

"It's okay..."

Billy knelt down, never feeling so scared in his life. He rarely cried in front of people, but right now between his father starting on him earlier in front of Susan, the fight with Steve, Max drugging him, and then nearly ripping his balls off with that bat, he couldn't take this a second longer. His girlfriend, a girl he had just started really falling for was laying on a stretcher. He didn't know what was wrong, but this was the last thing he could handle. He sniffled, and reached, grabbing her hand and squeezing it.

"What happened baby?"

Tears rolled down his face, not caring how he looked. July used her other hand to lower the oxygen mask down to her chin, she looked so pale.

"I...had a seizure, I gotta go to the hospital..."

It then hit him, as much as he wanted to pretend, July was really sick. He had to start facing reality and come to terms that this was happening.

"I..."

He lowered his head, pressing their laced hands up to his sore lip and let out a haggard breath. July's thumb gently rubbed his split lip.

"What happened?"

"BILLY!"

Billy nearly jumped, his eyes snapping open hearing his father's voice. Neil was in the house now, and Billy honestly couldn't handle this. Thankful Hopper spoke.

"Mr. Hargrove..."

"Neil."

It was Max, she was standing there with her mom. Neil looked furious, but turned. Max eyed Billy, before looking back up at Neil.

"I snuck out...I'm sorry. My friend Will has been sick, I heard he had a really high fever and I was worried about him and I snuck out."

"Your brother should have been watching you..."

Max shook her head.

"It was my fault, I snuck out. I went to the Byers' house, and Sheriff Hopper was there. Mrs. Byers was afraid he might need to go to the hospital and her car hasn't been working. His older brother was at

work, so the sheriff was gonna take them when Billy came. He was going to take me home when..."

Her words trailed off looking at his busted up face.

"When...he fell..in the driveway. He fell right on his face, and...well the sheriff didn't think he should drive so he offered to take his car and me back home while Mrs. Byers took sheriff Hopper's car with Will and Billy to the hospital."

The story sounded so stupid, everyone in the room could tell, but Hopper eyed Billy's busted up face, and him kneeling by this poor girl. He slowly nodded.

"Yep, you ended up not staying...wanted to see if I got your sister home alright. Son, don't worry, I talked with Max and she knows what she did was wrong and promised she'll never do that again. You really outta get that lip looked at."

Billy mental thanked the sheriff who's eyes said it all. Neil meanwhile glared.

"You...fell?"

Billy nodded.

"Yeah, tripped...the driveway is pretty dark. I'm fine, just wanted to come and see if Max came home okay."

"Or your car."

Neil snapped, before shaking his head. Hopper turned, and Billy could see right away the sheriff didn't like him. Maybe he could tell. Shaking his head, Hopper shook his head.

"Let's give the men room to wheel Ms. Criss out, come on..."

He ushered Neil, Susan, and Max out. Before leaving, Max locked eyes with Billy, and both understood. The bullshit was over. Earlier Max had stood up to Billy, and he knew his Neil way of trying to control her to keep an eye out on her wouldn't work. She was her own person, and there had to be boundaries. He cared about her as

much as he gave her a hard time, and Neil's threats had caused him to get this bad. Now they were even. Max, Neil, and Susan all were walked out, before Hopper glanced back.

"Maybe you outta go get that checked out. I'm sure there's room in the ambulance right boys?"

Billy wanted to burst out crying with relief. He knew if the sheriff said he could ride along, he would be allowed. He was planning on fighting the paramedics if they said he couldn't go with July. He didn't give two solid shits about his ribs or face, all he wanted was not to leave July's side.

Later...

They loaded up July, placing her oxygen mask back on as they wheeled her out. Billy refused to let go of her hand. July's mother said she would follow, and Billy kept talking calmly to July., trying to keep her awake. He wasn't too sure what exactly happened when somebody had a seizure, but he hated seeing how pale July was. He hurried along with them, carefully getting into the ambulance, and even snapping at the paramedics to be careful when they loaded her in. The paramedics rolled their eyes, and the back doors were slammed shut. He heard the siren as they started to move, and Billy brought her hand up to his lips, gently kissing her fingers.

"Shhhhhh...it's okay firecracker, I'm here."

July's eyelids kept fluttering closed, but he saw beneath her oxygen mask a small smile curl up on her lips.

Later...

"That's my fucking girlfriend!"

Billy snapped as two orderlies held him back. Once they arrived at the ER, July started getting wheeled away. Billy didn't want to leave her, and was currently flipping out when the nurses said he needed to get looked at himself. He fought them, saying he was fine, when for the second time tonight a needle was produced, and as three orderlies held him back, he was injected. His struggles weakened, and before

he knew it his eyelids felt heavy as he collapsed.

Later...

"Billy?"

Billy's eyes slowly opened. He was shirtless, showing his nasty bruised side and chest and now, a pair of hospital scrub pants. His head felt extremely heavy. He looked around and figured he was still in the ER. A blue curtain was pulled all the way around the bed he was laying on, and an IV was hooked up into his hand. His lip felt as if it was cleaned up yet tender, and a bandage was on his temple. His side still ached each time he breathed, and whatever they had injected in him, he felt soupy, and numb all over. July's mother was sitting beside him in one of the plastic issued hospital chairs. Her jacket was off now, and she looked worried. Billy stared at her, and could only see July. He mentally noted if this was what July was going to look like when she got older, he would gladly spend the rest of his life with her. He knew he had a thing before July for older women.

In fact, that's what caused all the trouble resulting in the move. Thinking of July aging into this pretty beauty was a comforting thought, before a horrible bone chilling thought overcame him. If she lives that long...

He pushed that thought away, hating himself for thinking that.

"Mrs. Criss?"

"It's okay Billy. You have a few cuts and bruises. Your side is pretty bruised up. I figured that story your sister and the sheriff wasn't the truth. Looks like you got into a pretty nasty fight, hate to see what the other guy looks like."

Billy tried to smile but couldn't, right away his eyes widened and he tried to sit up.

"July..."

"She's finishing up some tests, she's okay. Unfortunately this isn't her first seizure, but it was a bad one. Luckily Mrs. Kitter was coming by

to borrow something and found her. I just spoke to one of her doctors and he said by the scans the tumor has grown more, we gotta start chemo sooner than we thought."

Billy blinked, yet again none of his registered.

July was fine, she was a perfectly healthy teenager. Besides looking a little pale, and a few headaches and nosebleeds she was perfectly fine. She was full of life and energy. No, this seizure didn't mean shit.

No way...

Mrs. Criss sighed looking down at her hands.

"I just spoke to July's father, it's still going to be a few weeks until he can come home. July is in high spirits but we had a talk and...she wanted me to talk to you. July cares about you very much, and...well we're not stupid. I saw the other marks on you. Is it your dad?"

Billy didn't say anything, but his silence was enough. Mrs. Criss sighed.

"I could talk to the sheriff..."

Billy shook his head.

"No, it's okay. Really, please."

Mrs. Criss nodded before sighing and reaching over, touching his marked up arm. Her hand was dry and cool. Faintly Billy could smell her perfume, and faintly thought of that sweet smelling sunblock his mother used to wear. Mrs. Criss looked at him, her eyes serious.

"Listen to me Billy. If things ever get bad at your house...or you need a break, or anything...I want you to have this."

She produced a single key from her purse. "I made a spare a few days ago. This is to the house. If you're hungry, or need a shower, or just need someplace to sleep or take a break..you use it. I spoke with my husband, and even though he doesn't know you, he knows how much you mean to July and said our home is your home, all right?"

Billy felt overwhelmed. This was honestly the nicest thing anyone had ever done for him. He looked at her as tears began to form in his eyes.

"Like I said...if he ever goes too far, just know you're not alone. You need somebody to go to the sheriff I'll be right there by you...and if you need someplace to live, you have a home understand?"

Billy fought back the tears, one escaping as it traveled down his bruised and swollen face. He sniffled.

"Thanks..."

Mrs. Criss smiled.

"What can I get you honey. They said you can probably go home tomorrow since it's so late. I'll drive you home in the morning. Is there anything you need?"

Billy roughly wiped at his eyes embarrassed before sniffling.

"Can I see July?"

Mrs. Criss sadly smiled and nodded.

"I'll call upstairs and see if she's done her tests."

"Mrs. Criss?"

"What honey?"

Billy stared at her before he said the one sentence he dreaded to say aloud.

"How long does she have?"

Mrs. Criss sighed.

"With chemo? Maybe six more months if we're lucky. I tried to tell her she didn't have to do this, that she doesn't need to spend what little time she has left sick and uncomfortable, but she said she wants to fight, even if the chances are low...she said she has a reason now

to try and fight."

"What's that?"

Mrs. Criss sadly smiled and patted his hand.

"You."

Later...

Billy didn't want the wheelchair, but Mrs. Criss insisted. She had spoken to the doctors, and even though it was late, they agreed as long as the visit was brief. Mrs. Criss said Hopper came in earlier and said everything was all set, and offered to drop Billy off at his house in the morning but Mrs. Criss said wanted to. The thought of going home, even after Max and the sheriff made up that half bullshit story still made him scared. God knew what Neil wanted to do to him, mostly after the scene he made when he saw July with the paramedics. Mrs. Criss pushed him upstairs to a private room, and as soon as they entered, Billy saw just the tiny light above the bed was on, leaving the room dim. The bay window overlooking the town showed tiny little lights that was probably downtown. July was sitting up in bed drinking a tiny ginger ale can with a straw. She had on a hospital gown, and her hair was tied back in a messy ponytail. Her face was pale, and her lips seemed to be a light grayish blue. She had two thin tubes going up her nose for oxygen, which made Billy's heart sink.

She had an IV hooked up to her arm, and her legs were crossed at the ankles, wearing hospital issued socks. The second she saw him the same sparkle in her eyes came, and that smile that completely melted and won Billy over every time was there. He saw beneath each eye was tiny brownish circles that showed she was exhausted.

"Billy!"

Billy ignored the pain in his face and grinned back as Mrs. Criss wheeled him over to her.

"See, I told you I would bring him up."

"They keeping you hostage too. What happened in the ER? I heard

you screaming and carrying on..."

Billy made a face.

"I flipped when they wouldn't let me go with you and they had to sedate me."

It was July's turn now to make a face.

"Jesus Billy, what is this a soap opera. I've been to the ER what is it mom? Twelve times in the last two years? They just wanted to run tests and keep me here for a few days..."

Mrs. Criss put the break on the chair, before patting his shoulder.

"I'll be back in a half an hour, I'm gonna go get some coffee."

She left, shutting the door behind her, and the second they were alone, Billy ignored the pain flaring through his body and stood up, stepping away from the chairs, and going to her. Gathering her in his arms, he meantly noted how thin she felt against him, like a scarecrow. He hated this, but needed to hold her. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her right against his bare chest, ignoring the pain and squeezing her tight.

"Billy what..."

Before she could finish, Billy covered her mouth with his, cutting off her words and air. He plunged his lips against hers, forcing her mouth open, feeling the sting of his cut lip as he thrust his tongue into her mouth, moaning between her mouth, as he snapped his eyes shut. He felt himself growing hard from inside his scrubs, and he wanted nothing more than to lay her down, pull her hospital gown up, and his pants down and lay between her legs and bury himself deeply inside of her. Instead, July gently pushed him back, breaking the kiss, tiny trails of spit trailing between them as she laughed and wiped her mouth, before reaching, her thin fingertips touching his split tender lip.

She sighed.

"Jesus..."

Billy sighed before she looked at him.

"What happened?"

Billy sighed, holding her hands with his between them.

"Fucking Harrington, I ended up finding Max at the Byers house after checking two other houses."

"Steve? He did this?!"

"Yeah, well sorta. Neil got pissed that Max had snuck out and flipped out...I had to look everywhere and he was there lying that Max was there even though I saw her in the window with her little piss ant friends. He started some shit and the fucking pussy couldn't even finish the fight once I got the upper hand. Then Max stuck me with something that made me pass out..."

"WHAT?!"

"Yeah, I'm fine but I was out for at least a half an hour. I grabbed a ride home since they were all gone when I woke up and my car was missing. When I came to the street I saw the ambulance and ran over and the sheriff was there with my car and Max. You heard that stupid story they tried to feed my dad?"

July nodded.

"Sounded weird."

"Whole thing is weird...I just don't care anymore. Max can go to Hell..."

"Billy..."

"No I mean it. I've done nothing but try and help her and look out for her and this is the thanks I get. I'm done being her baby sister. Maybe her mom might be interested she's been hanging out with a high school student..."

"You're poor face..."

She leaned over, gently kissing it, before seeing his chest and side, Leaning down she planted a few light kisses there, before sitting up. Billy sighed, before rubbing her cheek in circular motions with his thumb.

"What about you? What happened?"

"I got off the phone with you, and bang it happened. This wasn't my first seizure, sometimes I have silent ones where I just space out for a few seconds...even piss myself which is super embarrassing, but this was a bad one. My felt myself shaking, hit my head on the floor and blacked out. I came to when the paramedics used smelling salts. I just gave a ton of blood and they ran more labs. I guess the tumor grew..."

"Yeah...your mom told me..."

"I'm gonna start chemo next week. They tried to get me in right away but that's as soon as they can do it."

"What's it like?"

"It's no walk in the park that's for sure. I'm going for a more aggressive round. Basically I get it done downstairs in a lab. I sit in a chair for a few hours and they give me this stuff through an IV. Then I can come home, it just makes me really sick and weak. They tried radiation but they think if I do both it might be too much. They are planning on six weeks of chemo. Might stop the tumor from growing and shrink it down...they tried operating on it before but it's too big and it's spread out pretty badly. My hair ends up falling out, I'm weak, I throw up a lot..."

"Good thing I'll be right beside you holding your hand..."

Billy lifted her hand giving it a kiss, instantly he saw the heartbreak in July's eyes.

"What?"

"Billy listen...I know we've had this talk before, and I love you...I love you a lot, but take a look at what happened tonight. We had this special night planned and..."

"My fucking step-sister ruined it."

July shook her head.

"No, even if that hadn't of happened I still had a seizure, and they are only going to keep getting worse. This chemo stuff is really intense, and the chances aren't that good. You're so handsome, and everyone now worships you at school. You deserve to be with a healthy girl who isn't constantly living in hospitals, puking, or having accidents. What I'm saying is...it's going to get really intense, and I'm giving you an 'out'. No hard feelings. We can just be friends and..."

"No."

"But Billy..."

"No damnit. I don't know how many times I need to say this but I can handle it...I'm not leaving you. We'll kick this stupid tumor's ass together. I'm not leaving you July. I love you Goddamnit. Let Hawkins keep their shitty po-dunk chicks. I want you and we're gonna fucking beat this okay?"

"I just don't want to be a burden...you deserve to have fun not..."

Billy softly kissed her lips again, before July sighed, knowing his answer. She smirked, before he brushed back a loose piece of fallen hair that had gotten away from her ponytail. He ran his large hand over her smooth cool feeling face, before pressing his forehead against hers.

"How long you gotta stay here?"

"At least another day, then they said lots of rest until next week. My mom still needs to go see my aunt but I don't think she'll want to leave again after what happened..."

Billy took one of her hands, and turned it over. Lightly he traced the lines of her palm with his finger.

"Tell you what? I'll convince your mom that I'll keep an eye on you, and 911 on speed dial, and whichever night she decides...I'll stay over and we'll finish what we wanted to start tonight."

July smirked looking at him.

"Seriously?"

"If you still want to?"

"Of course. I would love to before I start my treatments...but are you sure?"

"July...I've never wanted something more in my life."

She laughed, before he brought her hand up and gently kissed it, before looking across at her.

"If you change your mind...of you don't feel good no pressure. I'll just keep you company. I'll take care of you...trust me, we got the time."

He gathered her up in his arms, hugging her and kissing her shoulder while July stared forward worried and near tears. She loved him so much she couldn't stand it, but he was wrong. They didn't have all the time in the world. In fact, a clock was ticking away loudly inside of her, one that she was absolutely scared to death of.

Later...

When Mrs. Criss came to bring Billy back she stopped once she opened the doorway. She smiled, as the night nurse walked beside her and looked in as well. Instantly, she smiled.

"Isn't that adorable?"

Both silently walked in, to find July fast asleep, nestled up against Billy. Her head resting on his bare chest, slowly rising and falling as Billy breathed. His large bruised arms were wrapped around her. Billy's eyes opened once they approached and he stared up at them and spoke in a thick, but soft voice.

"Please let me stay, I wanna stay here with her."

The nurse and Mrs. Criss glanced at each other, before the nurse sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Okay, but we're doing checks on her almost every twenty minutes, you won't get a wink of sleep."

Billy glanced down at July sleeping soundly and smirked.

"Doesn't matter..."

Mrs. Criss smiled, her heart warming at the sight of them. Leaning over, she kissed Billy's forehead, which gave him instant comfort. Mrs. Criss was beautiful like her daughter, but this wasn't like before, or his certain charms and power over older women that he often used to his advantage. After he was given the key earlier, and had the little talk with her, he actually felt like he had family. He smiled up at her as she whispered...

"I'll be by in the morning to pick you up."

Billy nodded, thanking her as she left as the nurse checked July's IV bags before leaving them and shutting the door behind her. Laying there in silence, Billy wrapped his arms a little tighter around July, as if he was never going to let her go.

Later that week...

A lot had happened since that night. Mrs. Criss dropped him off the next day, he changed back into his regular clothes and promised July he would see her later that afternoon. Mrs. Criss took his mind off things talking in the car, and by the time they reached her house he got her to agree on visiting her sister for the weekend as long as he kept an eye on July, have her not leave the house, and if anything seems like something might be wrong to call her right away. Billy thanked her again, and was surprised when she hugged him. Crossing the street, he entered his house to find Neil at the kitchen table reading the paper, Susan silently making breakfast, and max nowhere to be found.

"How's the face?"

His father asked not looking up from his paper. Billy kept his stomach twist up before he shrugged.

"Fine."

"Must have taken one Hell of a fall to get that busted up. What did the doc say?"

"Um, just to ice it."

"Don't understand why they had to keep you over night. Just another fucking excuse for a bill."

Billy said nothing, before Neil folded the paper and turned to the next page. Everyone in the room knew that Billy would pay for his own bills, even though Neil had the whole family on his insurance plan through work. Billy knew he would just have to sell some pot and take care of whatever extra came in the mail for his stay at the hospital. Still, having been able to end that nightmare of a day by laying in bed with July was well worth it. Susan asked if he wanted breakfast and Billy said no thanks. He planned on showering, changing, and looking over his car. He suspected there might be some new dings and scratches in it, but truly he knew there was nothing he could do about it. Max and him had a silent understanding, and he suspected she was off with her new little friends. Still, he swore to himself that prick Steve better stay out of his way.

After everything that had happened with July, he wasn't in the mood to see his smug little face. He visited July that afternoon, having driven over and brought her a rubber shark he bought at that stupid store downtown in the kid's section while picking July up flowers and himself a pack of smokes. He saw the lady who's house had had gone to the night before checking him out, but she didn't seem to know him. Somehow their paths hadn't crossed since she wasn't home when he was drugged. He went to see July and spent three straight hours there until visitor hours were over and he was forced to leave. July gushed over the shark and flowers, and fussed over Billy arranging them in a plastic cup by her bed, while he arranged them the way she liked best. He sat on the bed with her as they watched TV, and he kept making her laugh, mostly when her dinner arrived and he helped her eat her green Jello and pretended to throw it back up only to have the nurse catch him and shoot him a dirty look. Both laughed until it hurt, and before he left he told her that her mother had agreed on going away and him staying over. Right away he saw how thrilled she was, and he kissed her goodbye, playfully messing with

her hair, letting her know he would see her tomorrow after school once she got home. At school he only spotted Steve once who quickly avoided him. He figured there would be another time. The last thing he needed was a detention which would mess up his plans with July.

At home he stayed out of his father's way, and only shared a few glances at Max. He went over to see July after dinner and stayed to watch a movie with her on her TV upstairs. He laid in bed with her, seeing she had brought home the shark and flowers which were on her nightstand.

"Here, I wanna do it here...that okay?"

Billy, who was laying behind July, hiked up on one elbow watching her tiny TV, raised an eyebrow.

"Hum?"

July turned slightly and smiled. He had spotted new meds downstairs, and knew she was tried, the circles were still underneath her eyes.

"When we finally do it...let's do it here."

Billy looked around, before finally looking down at her and grinning.

"Perfect."

Both kissed. Days passed, and Billy couldn't wait to get to the weekend. School dragged, as did his rides driving Max around, dropping and picking her up. He would always mutter to her not to be late, but didn't hassle her. She would thank him, and besides that they didn't talk. He helped around the house, and they were just really starting to really make some progress with unpacking the last of the boxes. Neil still hassled him, but had eased up a bit since Max seemed happy, and was always brought home on time.

Finally the weekend came. July called telling him to swing by around eight. Max was home for the night with Susan watching some stupid movie, and Neil was off drinking with his work buddies. Billy took an extra long shower, deciding to be freshly shaken. He even trimmed down below, and flexed his muscles in the bathroom mirror, cursing

himself that he hadn't really been working out as much this week. Still, the bruises and cuts were faded and healing nicely. He opted for no underwear, and zipped on his tightest pair of jeans which made his ass look amazing...or at least that's what July said. He wore a dark sleeveless navy blue shirt and didn't bother buttoning it. He made sure he was wearing his St. Christopher's necklace, and went to his room to mess with his hair for the next twenty minutes. He listened to his music, and couldn't believe how jeepped up he was getting.

The last time he was getting ready for this Neil and burst in and ruined everything. He would be damned if this happened again. He was bringing condoms even though he knew he didn't need them. He also had scored a bottle of wine which he was planning on hiding beneath his jacket that he had at the bottom of his closet. He smiled at his reflection, puffing on a cigarette and the furthest thing from his mind was July being sick. No, tonight he was finally going to have sex with his girlfriend, and he was determined to make this feel like her first time and forget all about that asshole Steve. No, he was ready to rock her world. Smiling, he winked at his reflection before shrugging on his jacket, grabbing the bottle of wine and hiding it beneath his jacket. He walked out, not even bothering to say goodnight to Susan and Max. Not knowing that Max was watching with sad eyes.

She was happy Billy had stopped trying to control her and knew she was capable of standing up for herself, but ever since she saw how scared he looked with July when she was being taken away by the paramedics, she felt sorry. She had overheard her mom talking on the phone to one of her new friends. July was actually much sicker than she thought. In fact her mother had used the word...

Dying.

Sighing, Max heard the front door and turned her direction back to the TV.

Meanwhile... Billy felt an extra swing in his step as he crossed the street, faintly hearing crickets chirp in the bushes. It was a chilly November night, and July had mentioned if he wanted to spend Thanksgiving with her family. Her dad was supposed to be home.

Billy figured Neil wouldn't care if he spent the holiday with them, and really felt that this might be the first actual decent holiday he might have in what seemed like years...

He stopped and saw beneath the porch light, taped to the door a note, written in July's handwriting.

Billy,

I'm upstairs. Come on in. - July

Billy smirked ripping the note off, and finding the door unlocked. He shut it behind him, before walking through the darkened downstairs. He went to the kitchen, tossed out the note, before searching in the cabinets for a corkscrew and two wine glasses. He found himself humming, and smiled. Going up the stairs, he stopped and saw scattered rose petals in the hallway on the floor. Smiling, he shook his head as his eyes followed the trail that led to July's bedroom.

"Firecracker, you certainly are something else..."

He muttered under his breath, walking over the beautiful dark rose petals that were laid across the cream colored carpet. He reached her bedroom door, and pushed it open. The lights were off, but there were at least a dozen candles lit on her dresser, creating a beautiful golden dim glow in the room. It smelled sweet, but not of lavender, something sweeter like strawberries. He walked in, holding the two wineglasses in one hand, and the bottle of red wine in the other. A few foil packages of condoms in his left pocket of his jeans. That's when he stopped dead in his tracks in the doorway. He couldn't believe it. July was laying on the bed, the rose-petals leading to the bed and circled around it.

She was wearing a lace red bra and silk panties. Her hair was up, and her makeup smoky, her lips painted ruby red like on Halloween.

She smiled.

"Hey..."

Billy's jaw dropped, looking at July's body, taking it all in, and instantly the glasses and wine bottle slipped from his fingers and

thankfully landed on the carpet with heavy thuds, not breaking. He stared and couldn't believe it. July smiled, before slowly sitting on her knees and reached and unclasped her bra from the front, letting the cups and straps fall as she sat on her bed and smiled at him. Billy grinned as he ignored the fallen glasses and bottle of wine, shrugged off his jacket and hurried towards her.

- So guys I'm thinking the next chapter will be in July's POV. Thoughts?

8. The true first time

July couldn't believe how nervous she was.

It wasn't that this was her first time. No, two years ago her and her friend Steve had a long talk one summer night about how they didn't want to go all through high school being virgins. This was before July got too sick to officially stop going, and as always July hung out more with boys than girls. She found them easier to get along with. There was no caddy comments, no competition. With guys it was just easier. They liked going to the movies, or taking hikes, and playing air hockey in her parent's basement. Still, July was a teenager and curious, and in the end her and Steve agreed they would both lose it to each other. This way it happened with somebody they trusted and cared about, no strings attached. July thought Steve was cute, but nothing really past that. Much like Tommy she had known him her whole life. They had grown up together. Steve's parents were wealthy, and July used to love going over there to use the pool during the summer. Tons of memories from their childhood would come back of them bouncing on the pool floats, getting into splash fights, and drinking water straight from the hose as they ran around outside pretending to be cowboys, or killer robots. They spent hours planning it out, actually getting excited, and in the end it really wasn't that big of a deal. July had been dating around, as was Steve who was becoming quite popular. They decided as good friends to get it over with, and just do it this once so it wouldn't get weird. It ended up being one summer night that Steve's parents were out of town. July told her parents she was spending the night over Jessica's house, a friend of hers from school, and arrived there giddy and nervous. Steve and her drank some beers from the spare fridge in the garage that his father kept extras, both agreeing that the beer tasted awful. They talked, joking around, before deciding it was now or even before they got too spooked and chickened out. There was no four-play, and barley any kissing. July had only unzipped her jeans and stepped out of her panties. Steve didn't watch her undress, before July asked him if they could put something down in case she bled, she had heard that happened. Steve brought a brown towel from his bathroom, and July nervously spread it out on the couch.

Steve asked if she wanted him to light a fire? July said she was fine. It was hot outside, even though inside the AC was on full blast. Steve put on music. Air Supply. July wanted to laugh at how cheesy it was, but held it back afraid that she might hurt Steve's feeling. He seemed just as nervous as her. He unzipped his jeans, and nearly tripped as he stepped out of his boxers. She saw his penis, and looked down, feeling herself blushing. He sat down beside her and struggled putting the condom on. The first he took off saying he thought he put it on wrong and it pinched. He tried again, and this time he ripped it. He swore, before finally getting it the third time, rolling it down his shaft. She laid back, he climbed on top of her. He positioned himself, she held him by the shoulders, and he kept asking if she was okay? Finally he entered her in one hard direct motion.

She stiffened, at first ready to cry out, then she allowed herself to relax. It was a weird sensation. It wasn't anything like the girls had explained. Not nearly as painful. It was uncomfortable, as was the pressure, but Steve took his time. He laid still for awhile, before finally her muscles relaxed, and she nodded.

"Okay."

He moved just a few times, and in less than fifteen seconds he cried out, swearing and climaxed. July was left sorta stunned. It was truly nothing like she expected. It wasn't humiliating, or as painful as the girls at school swore it was like. It wasn't passionate, and she didn't climax like she did whenever she touched herself. No, there was no fireworks, or passion. Just some stinging, pressure, and that's it. Steve seemed embarrassed and pulled out. He snapped off the condom, and covered himself with a throw from the couch. He sighed, pushing back his thick hair.

"Sorry..." July looked down at herself. There wasn't any mess, or blood. She smirked, before sitting up, crossing her legs before rubbing his arm.

"Hey, it was perfect."

Steve made a face.

"Yeah right."

"Hey, this was our first time ever. Thank you...I wouldn't have wanted it with anyone else."

Steve turned smiling, still looking a little embarrassed.

"Really?"

"Really?"

Steve smiled.

"Say...give me a few minutes and wanna try again?"

July felt a little sore down below, but figured tonight was the night for experimenting. She trusted her friend Steve and cared for him. She wanted both of them to walk away from this with a little more knowledge so when they did meet somebody special, they would be ready. In the end Steve and her did it two more times that night. Both didn't try any other positions, besides him on top of her. He took awhile to get hard the second time, and used his hand before finally being able to put the next condom on. July kept asking if he was certain he put it on right. She wasn't on the pill, and getting pregnant by Steve "the hair" Harrington was the last thing she needed. He reassured her, and the second time lasted longer. It still hurt when he first entered, but he started to find a bit of a pace, and lasted a few minutes. The third time, just as July felt the motion of rubbing causing her to tingle and perhaps get close to climaxing, he finished himself. She used his shower, and he used the one downstairs. They got dressed, ordered a pizza, and spent the rest of the evening laughing and watching TV. Swearing this would be the only time, and they wouldn't allow things to get weird. The next day, he hugged her tight, kissed her cheek and thanked her. She smiled, running her hand through his hair, and thanking him as well. They saw each other at a few parties that summer, Steve all ready dating around. They hung out, and were still close, never telling anyone about the pact they both made. July had been asked out a few times, but nothing serious. Once she got sick guys started to treat her differently. It was as if they acted like whatever she had they could catch.

Tommy visited her during one of her stays at the hospital and even

said once she got out he would love to take her out dancing, but she saw behind his eyes that this was speaking out of pure pity. Now things were different. Time had passed, and the reality of the tumor spreading had finally hit home. For the longest time she was ready to die. She knew it wasn't fair. She loved her life, her parents, her friends. She still had so much living to do. She wanted to go to prom, parties, date around, get a tattoo. She wanted to go to college, study and become a marine biologist. She wanted to study sharks, and travel the world. She wanted to swim in every ocean, see the world, drink, dance, have sex, meet a wonderful man, start a family, and teach her children as her parents did that it was okay to be different as long as you were kind. She had so many high hopes, but the illness taking over her body had started to break her down. The treatments sucked any strength she had left. She was so exhausted by feeling tried all the time, nauseous, and in pain.

Sometimes the pain was so awful she couldn't stand it. Tasting her own blood, her head pounding, the room spinning. She hated the sores the chemo made in her mouth, making everything burn and taste awful. She hated seeing that was supposed to be a firm healthy body get thin and weak. She hated the pills, and weeks spent in bed unable to even lift her head. She hated vomiting, and pissing herself, watching her poor parents watch their only child go through all of this. She hated them spending so much money on her hospital and doctor bills. She hated that her father worked all the time so they had the best insurance for her pills. She hated being so doped up all the time, knowing even if she did make it through, she might end up a junkie for the rest of her life. She hated tubes and needles, bedpans, and IV bags. She hated the treatments, and the stink of the hospitals. She hated watching everyone else enjoy high school while she was forced to stay home, lonely, and depressed. She wished they could just take it out but the doctor said at the rate it was growing even if they removed just a chunk it would leave her blind and paralyzed. She hated it all so much. She hated that at 17 her life was being cut short, but seeing her parents go through this, and feeling so sick and weak all the time...she just wanted it to end. At least that way she would be put out of her misery. She would stop dragging down her family, and being in such excruciating pain anymore. She believed there was a Heaven and God, even though she hadn't prayed in some time now since she was angry over the question of "Why her?" Still,

she figured if she did die, but would be put out of her misery.

No watching her parents go through this, and no more suffering. She would maybe go someplace peaceful where tumors didn't exist and she could be free.

Then...she met Billy. It had just been a few weeks, but she had fallen hard. She tried not to, but she honestly had never felt this way about anyone in her entire life. He came across as this tough asshole. A guy who drove a fast car, picked on people, and had a horrible temper. But she never saw that side of him. She only saw the side that was hidden, and broken down after many years of loss, and abusive. She saw he was kind, passionate, and loved her. She tried so many times to push him away, tell him to not feel obligated to stay with her. That she wanted him to be happy, not be with some sick girl because he felt "sorry" but she clearly saw the night of her seizure that he did care about her. That whatever they had was different than anything he had experienced before. She loved him. She had seen the test results, she had known her chances were very low. She would probably be dead by this spring even with treatment. If she hadn't met Billy, she would have simply given up and said no treatments. She wanted to spend whatever time she had left not spending it in hospitals and in pain. She would go on the heavy pain pills, not be in any discomfort, and spend the little time she had left lonely, but in peace. After she met Billy, she knew she needed to fight, even if the changes were so low. She needed to at least try. She would fight, even if the odds weren't in her favor. She needed to... But tonight none of that mattered. Tonight she was going to pretend was her first time. She loved Billy, and couldn't believe a guy like this actually cared about her this much. He was intense and passionate, and she wanted to experience this before it was too late. She was a smart young woman, and knew even if she fought it would probably just give her another month or so tops. Still, that would be another few months with Billy, and if she was going to die.

She would die fighting...and die happy. Tonight though she wanted to make love to her boyfriend and feel just for a few hours that she was a normal teenager. She had taken a few heavy duty pain meds so the headaches would be gone. She felt nice and relaxed because of them, a speedy little high that would keep her from not having the

strength to do this. She had planned everything out to be perfect. She wasn't exactly girly, or that romantic, but she wanted to make it special for herself and Billy. Her mother had left her some cash for food, and she had taken a cab downtown. She had heard about the new mall on the outside of town opening soon, and truly couldn't believe a huge indoor mall was actually being built in Hawkins. Still, she liked going downtown. It held a certain kind of charm, and she had tons of memories shopping with her mom there, looking at all the window displays when she was little. She picked up a dozen roses, and went into Ginger's a woman's boutique she had visited a few times before. In there, she bought a red silk slip which was short, and the lace bra and panties. She felt a little silly, but figured she wanted to really make quite the impression on Billy. Besides, he once mentioned whenever she wore red it drove him mad.

When she got home she showered, and took a good half an hour shaving her legs, balancing one at a time on the counter of the sink. She even shaved down below, knowing she should have made a spa appointment, but really didn't know about this sort of thing. She wished she had been a little more open with her mother since she was so laid back and easy going, but figured this was private and between the two of them. She was careful, and ended up using some of her mother's expensive smelling cream all over her body that smelled wonderful and left a light sparkle of shimmer all over her body. Speaking of shimmer, she laughed and took out of the package the new shimmer tights she had bought downtown as well. She knew Billy had a thing about her wearing these and him ripping them open, so she decided to humor him and wear them underneath her panties. She laughed at how stupid it seemed, but actually was impressed with how cute they looked. She sprayed some of her fancy perfume on, made sure everywhere was plucked, shaved, and smooth. She stared at her breasts in the bathroom mirror, turning to the side and smiling, cupping them with her own hands and giving them a gentle squeeze. Billy's hands were so much larger than hers and loved cupping them with his hands, and squeezing right before sucking on the pale skin around her dark brownish nipples. She put on the bra, adjusting the straps and liked how amazing it made them look. She thought of wearing the nightgown and decided against it. She would wear it later. She blow-dried her hair and did it up in a bun like he loved, twirling little strands to frame each side of her

face.

She decided against jewelry, and laughed as she applied her makeup. First smoky eyes, then used the same ruby red lipstick to her lips. She posed a few times in the mirror, before smiling and laughing before going to pluck the petals off the roses and spread them. She wrote a quick note, taped it to the door once it got dark, and left it unlocked. She had cleaned her sheets and even sprayed some perfume on the pillows, before checking the clock and felt her stomach flutter with excitement He would be here soon. She checked her makeup one last time, and knew deep down inside, she was doing this all for herself. She owed it to herself after everything and just wanted to let go. She checked her nose, seeing no blood and thanked God. The pill was making her nice and zippy, as she took a deep breath and climbed on the bed. She smoothed out the sheets, surrounded by the soft petals, and posed. She laid there before cracking up completely. She could see herself, and shook her head. She guessed it was right, love really did drive you crazy.

Later...

His reaction was well worth all the prep. She wasted no time in unclasping her bra, and letting her breasts fall out. She felt her heart hammer in her chest as he approached her, shrugging off his jacket quickly, and throwing it behind him. He took his shirt off and met her on the edge of the bed. Him standing, her kneeling. She stared up at him, before reaching up and running her open palms against his broad muscular chest. The skin was hot, and she could feel his heart hammering from inside of him. She ran her hands over his pecks, his abs, and down to his stomach, right where the hair poked out from the waistband of his jeans. She leaned forward, gently kissing where the healing bruises were, which were lighting up, no longer tender. She tasted the sweet taste of his musk and sweat beneath the same Irish Green soap he used whenever he showered. This smell instantly associated with heavy make-out sessions. She could smell the cologne he used, which drove her wild. It was lightly used on him, but it was the sweet taste of his sweat that made his run her tongue over his chest in tiny trails all the way down to his belly button. His hands went to her, but she forced them down. She began softly kissing his skin, over his nipples which were rock hard, causing him to hiss out,

up to his throat. He was clean shaven, even though she could faintly feel the scratch of stubble all ready coming in. She met him, face to face and locked eyes. His were serious and dark, she saw there was a hunger in them like hers were. "I...want you to fuck me Billy...hard." She couldn't believe those words came from her mouth, maybe it was the pill, or how horny she felt. Her heart was pounding, and she never felt like she needed somebody as badly as she wanted him. He stared at her, amused by her choice of words. She brought his hand down to her panties, going inside them, and snaking own below where all of the heat and pulse was. She felt his fingers curl upwards, rubbing against her clit, and feeling how wet she was. She stiffened a cry, rocking back and forth on her knees, as he started rubbing her down below. He had fingered her twice before, and each time she ended up squirming, twisting and turning, grabbing onto her sheets, trying her hardest not to cry out since her mother was always downstairs in the living room. Tonight they were alone, and July wasn't holding back. He was smiling, pressing his forehead against hers as he continued rubbing.

Suddenly she felt his pointer finger turn, and enter her in one quick motion. She gasped. His fingers were thick, and rough from working on his car. It began to twitch and move, before two more fingers entered, spreading her open as they jabbed in and out. July felt as if her legs were made of water. She began breathing heavy as Billy closely watched her. She could feel his fingers buried deep inside of her, his thumb moving in quick circular motions before the tingling began to build. Suddenly an explosive orgasm hit her like a brick wall. She cried out loudly, before falling backwards on the bed. Billy took his hand out of her panties, slick with her juices. She laid back stunned, sweating, and exhausted, before she looked up as he grinned and slowly began to lick each finger, as if he had just finished some tasty cake. He watched her amused, before he undid his belt.

"I'm gonna fuck you..."

He said, his voice slightly shaken. She laid back, before pushing her panties down which were now damp at the crotch. She flung them to the side, as she watched him unzip his jeans, and push them down. Right away his massive erection popped out, stiff and hard out of the dirty blond mass of pubic hair. She had seen his penis plenty of

times, had jerked it off, had it in her mouth now at least seven or eight times. She had swallowed him cum, and had even cupped his balls once, curious, and enjoying how he squirmed this time and breathed heavy as she gently rubbed them. His penis was a strained purple color, and saw saw a thin glaze of pre-cum on the swollen tip. She saw his balls hang beneath, filled with cum, which was ready to shoot out inside of her. She took a deep breath, still coming down from the high of that strong orgasm. She could all ready feel a pulse again building down below, ready for round two. She spread her legs, showing she had on the shimmer tights. Billy laughed, stepping out of his boots and jeans. He stepped forward to the edge of the bed, holding her from each knee, staring down at her.

"Say you want my big cock."

July wanted to laugh but held back, he was serious. His eyes dark and intense. She took a deep breath and nodded.

"I want your big cock."

"Say you want me inside of you."

"I want you inside of me."

"Deep."

"Deep."

He leaned forward and cupped her sensitive spot between her legs where the heat and pulse was. He gently rubbed her clit from the other side of the tights that he had snaked under the tights and panties just moments before. He reached down, and zipped the crotch of the tights open like some wild man. The sound of the fabric ripping filled the air, as he ripped it open violently, and suddenly July felt very turned on. She spread her legs as far as she could, when Billy stared down at her. He took her wrist firmly, squeezing and brought it to the head of his penis. Her light fingers danced open the swollen tip, before Billy sighed.

"Scoot up on the bed, keep your legs spread."

She did as she was told, the tights now really holding on to each leg,

the crotch and ass completely torn open by Billy. She laid back, head now touching the pillows, as she stared up at him.

"Billy now..."

Billy let go of her wrist, and ran his own hands through his wild tangled hair, before reaching down and cupping her breast. His thumb rubbed over her nipple, as she sighed, staring off to the side. Billy leaned down, gently kissing her breasts, licking her nipples, before traveling up her chest, to her collarbone, and throat. July stared to the side, before he held her chin and turned her to look up at him. He smiled, before opening his mouth, and deeply kissed her. She moaned between the kiss, faintly tasting cigarettes and peppermint gum he must of had earlier. His tongue flicked against hers, moaning as his hands explored her breasts, one dropped down below rubbing her down there, before he broke the kiss and stared down at her. She felt his necklace dangling and resting on her chest. He stared down at her, and for just a brief fraction of a second she saw sadness and confusion flicker in his dark blue eyes. As soon as it appeared, it was gone. She stared up at him, before he kissed her again. Once this one broke a few moments later, he cupped her face gently.

"Are you sure?"

She had to smile. One second he was ripping her tights like a wild man, telling her to talk dirty, now his eyes looked so kind and worried. Smiling, she leaned up slightly and kissed him.

"Yes."

He nodded, cradling his weight above her, hovering as he stared down.

"Spread your legs a little more."

"Okay..."

He looked straight ahead at her headboard, as if keep in thought. She glanced down, their bodies less than an inch apart as he hovered over hers. He wrapped his hand around his swollen cock, before he

positioned himself. He looked down at her, she was nervous and licked her lips.

"Ready?"

She nodded. She felt the tip graze against her entrance, before in one swift motion, he pushed forward, his hips meeting hers, before his entire shaft filled her. He gritted his teeth, before she snapped her eyes shut. There was pressure and pain, but it was nothing like it was with Steve. Billy was much bigger. The pain was sharp and direct. It wasn't like a period cramp, but it was sharp and stung.

"Billy it's too big...take it out..."

Billy looked as if he was struggling himself, his eyes were closed for a second, before he opened them, and saw tiny tears rolling out of July's eyes. He quickly used his free hand to wipe her tears, before finding her open hand that laid like a dead fish to the side of her, and laced his much larger hand into hers.

"Shhhh, give me a second. You're too tight...hold on baby...hold on just another second..."

July let out a deep breath, staring at the ceiling, as Billy fought to enter her completely. She felt as if he was buried all the way inside of her, probably stabbing her internal organs. She didn't want to cry or chicken out, she knew this would be expected. She hadn't had sex in two years, and Billy was so much bigger than Steve. She was wet, but was having a hard time. She knew Billy was having a hard time holding back, and looked a little uncomfortable himself. He continued squeezing her hand.

"Move your hips up baby...hold on..."

She did as she was told, trying to scoot down a little on her ass, she moved her hips up, as he grunted and pushed forward, she stiffened and cried out, and for a second he was still. She could faintly feel right below where he had entered, the warmth of his balls hanging and laying against her. She didn't know if she was bleeding, but it hurt like Hell. She laid there and whimpered, before Billy pressed his forehead against hers.

"I'm sorry...I'll take it out baby, hold on..."

Instantly he looked guilty.

"No!"

She said, surprising him. He laid there staring down, earring dangling. She wrapped one leg around and covered his bare ass and pressed it down into her.

"Don't stop."

"You're...too fucking tight...I'm hurting you..."

He gritted between his teeth. She shook her head.

"Tell me what to do...should I move my hips and shook down more?"

Billy looked in a daze, before he nodded.

"Yeah, slowly...if it hurts too much I'm pulling out."

July took a second, her leg still wrapped around his ass, before she scooted down with him and bucked her hips up. Billy took a second, before adjusting himself. He bit his bottom lip, before he grunted, and pushed himself forward. Then suddenly it seemed like the right position. The pain eased up, and suddenly July felt much more comfortable. She sighed loudly, before Billy looked down, his face relaxed as he now had entered her fully, and wasn't uncomfortable himself.

"Good?"

July nodded licking her lips.

"Just go slow..."

"If I don't I'm gonna cum...hold on this is gonna sting but I think I got it okay?"

She nodded. He slowly began to pull out. At first July's eyes widened, wanting to know what the Hell was he doing?! It felt okay! Then, she

understood what he was doing. He withdrew almost all the way out, just the head barley inside of her. The feeling of her muscles stretching inside made her quiver. She couldn't believe how big he really was. The feeling of emptiness was left with her, and she was tempted to wrap her leg around him tighter to cause him to go back in. Instead she was patient, and waited before he looked down.

"Am I bleeding?"

She tried to look down but couldn't. Billy shook his head, and stared down at her.

"No baby, but just lay back and relax, spread your legs as wide as you can okay? If it hurts you tell me?"

She nodded, before he lined his hips up again, this time his hands went beneath, and cupped her ass.

"Ready?"

She nodded eager, and feeling high as a kite. He smiled, holding her ass firmly before he pushed forward, and thrustured into her again. She held back a cry, biting down on her bottom lip, as he pushed, and filled her again. He withdrew again almost all the way, and then sank his hips against hers, filling her again. He made his thrusts long and drawn out, each time making her squirm and want to beg him to go back inside of her. His eyes were direct as he stared at her. Each time he pushed forward, driving his penis deeply inside of her, he could cup her ass, and bring her towards him, This went on for a few minutes, the only sound was their heavy breathing. Then he found a rhythm. He laid on top of her, his weight crushing and squishing her breasts. His ass started pumping, sweating and twitching between her legs. Her knees were both bent, legs bouncing as she laid back gasping, and clutching onto his shoulders which flexed. He found a pace, and started thrusting into her at a very fast rate. The bed began to creak, as Billy began grunting, sweat rolling off him as July dug her nails into the soft warm flesh of his back. He kept sucking on her lips, nipping at them, before burying his head against her shoulder. She ran her hands through his hair, as he squeezed the cheeks of her ass.

She felt herself getting close, and begged him not to stop. He started quickening his pace, pumping into her at a frightening rate. This went on for about fifteen solid minutes before she felt herself coming. She cried out his name, tossing her head from side to side, feeling the heat wash all over his entire body. A few minutes later, Billy pressed his forehead against hers, his thrusts slowing down and becoming more and more drawn out.

"I'm gonna come...I'm gonna come..."

He whispered, when suddenly he bucked his hips down to her once, twice, and he cried out, face flushing as he snapped his eyes shut and she felt his warm spunk fill her, dripping out between her legs. He tried to thrust one more time, still finishing, but pure exhaustion washed over him. He collapsed on top of her, letting go of her ass, and lacing his hands against with hers. They laid like that for awhile, both sweating, and trying to catch their breath. Finally, he lifted his head, hair hanging down in his face, before his eyes widened.

"I didn't hurt you did I?" July stared up, still in the lazy aftermath of good sex and exhaustion. She smiled and shook her head.

"No, not at all."

Billy smiled, leaning down and kissing her. July then smirked.

"Wanna do it again?"

Billy stared down at her as if she was crazy and laughed.

Later... Billy sat up against the headboard, sweating as July straddled his lap, slowly moving up and down, quivering in pleasure. Billy held her hips, exhausted and drained.

"I'm gonna come...I'm gonna come..."

July wrapped her arms around him, swaying and pumping her hips faster up and down on him.

Then suddenly, Billy cried out, climaxing hard. Exhausted, he laid back, gasping for breath. July laughed, trying to catch her own breath before she leaned over and kissed his face. She bucked her

hips and smiled.

"Get hard again, come on...I wanna do it again."

Billy looked up at her as if she was crazy.

"Baby, how can you have any fluids left in your body?"

July laughed before kissing his cheek.

"Guess I'm young and horny."

"You got that right."

She laughed, before she kissed him again.

"Okay, I guess I'll let you take a breather...for now."

He laughed, kissing her back as she slowly got off him and walked naked across the room before slipping on her red silk nightgown. She loved the smooth feeling of the material against her skin which was sweaty, and smelled of sex. She loved this smell, smelling just like Billy. In the last few hours they had done it five times. Three times him on top, the second with him taking her from behind. He tried to do it in her ass but she squealed and said she wasn't ready for that yet. He laughed and said fine and entered her from behind, holding her hips. She couldn't believe how amazing that felt, and cracked up when he told her it was called doggy style. Just now they tried with her on top. It was late now, and both in-between rounds had cracked open the wine. With the pills in her system, July only allowed herself to drink half a glass of wine, and couldn't believe how successful and good tonight had felt. She never thought she could orgasm that many times. Billy somehow knew exactly where to touch her, and make her squirm.

She enjoyed watching him come, and her heart melted whenever they finished he could ask her if he had hurt her? In fact at one point in-between, they had spooned, and she had said how sore she felt down below. He had gently rubbed her lower stomach, kissing her bare shoulders. He got up, naked himself, went to her window and cracked the window open a bit. He lit a smoke, making sure the smoke was going out the window. One thing she noticed, ever since

they got serious dating, he always made sure he cracked a window whenever he smoked even though July told him countless times she didn't mind. He leaned against the wall, taking drags of his smoke before July sat on the edge of the bed, fixing her hair that had gotten messy. Billy smirked at her.

"You okay?"

July looked up and smiled.

"Great...that was...amazing."

Billy smiled, before July motioned to her bathroom door.

"Wanna take a nice cool bath?"

Billy smiled flicking the cigarette out the window. Walking completely naked up to her, he smiled as she took in the nice view. He wrapped his arms around her, before kissing the top of her head.

"When you have your first session of chemo next week. I wanna be with you."

"What?"

"You heard me. I wanna be with you."

"But you have school..."

"Screw school, I wanna go with you."

"Billy that's sweet but it really isn't a place you wanna be. I get really sick and it can be gross..."

Billy shook his head.

"I'm going, understand?"

July smiled up at him, unable to explain it, but felt tears sting behind her eyes.

"Billy...you...are the most amazing man I've ever met, do you know that?"

Billy smiled wrapping his arms around her tight. He decided tonight he would let her know everything. Come clean if they were going to be honest with each other. He just hoped she wouldn't judge. After all the women he had slept with, July had been the best. He had never felt this way in his entire life...ever. But tonight, once they settled down to the bath together he planned on telling her everything. His mom, the abusive, and the real reason why they had to move.

9. The truth about the past

Later...

Billy and July with drew a nice warm bath in the old fashion claw tub in her bathroom. The two both laid beneath the soapy water on opposite sides. Both didn't need to cram in since it was a large tub, and took up most of July's bathroom. Billy was amused to see framed paintings of sharks on the light blue walls, as well as a shark soap dispenser on the sink. Both climbed in, slowly easing their bodies in beneath the water, smiling at each other as they slowly relaxed. Billy was a little too long for the tub, but sat up and wrung a dark blue facecloth in his hands, draining dripping water into the water. For the first time in what seemed like forever, Billy felt relaxed. The sex had been amazing, in fact the best he ever had. As much as he didn't want to spoil the evening, he knew he needed to come clean and be honest with her. It was truly the only way. He decided now or never. Looking across, he felt his heart ache. He couldn't believe he was letting himself fall this hard for somebody. He stared at her, laying across from him. One arm draped over the edge of the tub. Her skin pale, but beautiful. Her hair still up, and her lipstick now completely rubbed off thanks to him. He looked at the swell of he breasts that disappeared under the water and closely studied his features. He knew something like July would understand. He gently nudged her side with his foot under the water.

"You okay?"

July, who seemed lost in a happy thought blinked and looked at him smiling.

"Yeah...that was...intense."

"You're...not hurting anywhere are you? I mean...I wasn't too rough."

July smiled and shook her head.

"It hurt a little bit in the beginning, but besides being a little sore, how are you?"

Billy smiled.

"My balls will probably ache for a few hours, but it was worth it. I'm not just saying this...but that was the best fucking sex I ever had."

July laughed shaking her head.

"Yeah it was pretty awesome huh?"

"You got that right."

"I say after this...we take a break and just go to sleep. I just wanna lay in your arms...you can stay over right?"

Billy nodded, before July stared at him.

"What is it?"

Billy sighed.

"I...love you July."

"I love you to Billy."

"Well...I need to...come clean about some stuff about my past. If it changes the way you look at me, or don't wanna see me anymore, I'll understand. I know I should have told you earlier, but...after tonight...I know you're the one person I can actually talk about this stuff to."

July sat up straighter and looked at him water lapping around her, right away her eyes were serious and full of concern.

"Sure."

Billy sighed, still playing with the facecloth before taking a deep breath.

"My mom...took off when I was twelve. We were super close, but my dad was a piece of shit and constantly kicked the shit out of her. She finally had enough and took off. She left me behind, and a few months later I found out she was killed in a car accident. My dad

resented her, always convinced she was screwing around on him. He hated me for being his responsibility, first started calling me names, ragging on me if I wasn't good at sports, screamed at me over any little thing...then started beating me. A few years later he met Susan, Max's mother. She moved in, and suddenly I had this younger sister I had to look after...and suddenly care about. I watched as he got his new fucking family, and spent every possible opportunity to beat me, put me down, or remind me that my mother didn't love me enough to bring me with her, and ended up getting herself killed."

"Jesus..."

"I was...fucked up in the head. I guess I had mommy issues. I was really attracted to women who were older than me, some even looking like her. God I know how it sounds..."

July kept staring at him her eyes serious.

"Go on..."

Billy sighed, still twisting the facecloth.

"I slept with a woman for the first time when I was thirteen. I was over sexualized. Sure I dated other girls my own age, I put on the tough guy act...almost to like prove something to my fucking father. Then about a year and a half ago...well...I started...sleeping with my English teacher. Ms. Glenn. She was in her early twenties...pretty in a mousy sort of way, blond, blue eyes...looked...just like...Jesus Christ..."

"Like your mom?"

Billy raised his eyes ashamed.

"Yeah..."

July sighed as Billy struggled to finish.

"It didn't mean anything. Just something wrong and exciting. She had never had a boyfriend before, wore glasses, barley any friends...basically a spinster. It was just sex. I laid on the charm, and we would sneak around after class, or whenever her roommate wasn't

home. Then right around that time...Max...she...God I don't know had a moment or something and I found out she had this puppy dog...school girl crush on me."

"Your sister?"

"Step-sister but yeah. We were never close, but I started getting the sense...well she liked me. She acted like I annoyed her all the time, but I taught her how to skateboard, and Neil forced me to spend time with her. Then...I found this like diary she had, she wrote my name over and over again with stupid fucking hearts. I tried to ignore it, but something happened?"

July raised an eyebrow as Billy rolled his eyes.

"She...tried to kiss me...she admitted she liked me and I told her no fucking way. I think I could have been better about it, but she's just a kid...and she's my step-sister. On top of that I was terrified if Neil or her mom found out. She ran out crying...and well a few days later I guess she saw me and Ms. Glenn. She told Susan, who told my dad. Well...safe to say everything blew up pretty bad. My dad threatened to go to the police with Ms. Glenn since I was underage. It turned into this big thing, and Ms. Glenn...Jane was terrified. My dad got a job offer and basically as punishment moved us out of California. It was only right around the time we were almost ready to go that...Neil informed me that Jane...had gotten pregnant and asked for him to pay for the abortion, which he did. I tried contacting her but she had moved out and quit. I tried finding her for a while, even when we first got here...but she's long gone, basically knowing how screwed she could have been had anyone else found out. I was a student of hers...and under age. I never knew about the baby until after. I felt awful. I had no idea how far along she was...but Neil said it served me right. I got beaten so badly one night right before the move I blacked out. I pissed blood for a week. I wanted to kill Max, but Neil said if I did anything he would make sure I would be sorry. She suddenly became my...responsibility. She grew to hate me. I hated her...I felt so guilty, blaming myself. I decided to just let everything go. When we moved here I was furious. I loved California, even though it held so many bad memories. It wasn't until...I met you that I finally saw how messed up I've been since my mom...and what an asshole my dad has been. Max is just a kid, she didn't do anything

wrong. I care about her...I'm done being angry with her and I've just dealt with looking after her in the wrong way...and both me...and Jane...we were wrong. I guess I just...didn't want it to end that way. With you...I feel like this is a second chance. Once you get better...we'll graduate, I'll get a job and save up...and we'll head to California...that is if you'll go with me after hearing all of this."

July smirked.

"What are we gonna do? Become...movie stars?"

Billy laughed, feeling the weight of the world lift off his chest. His biggest fears was that she would judge him and be disgusted after what happened. Instead she didn't judge, and simply stared at him with those comforting eyes of hers. He now felt better, any tension or anger left inside of him was gone.

"I'll teach surf lessons...we'll open a shop. I'll teach you how to surf, and we'll rent out a little beach house...and party every night."

"Sounds like a plan."

"But first we'll have to get married...right on the beach."

"That goes without saying."

Billy burst out laughing, before dropping the facecloth with a plot into the water. He then motioned to her.

"Come here firecracker..."

July smiled, before slowly leaning forward. Billy pulled her onto his chest, splashing some water over the sides of the tub, before gently kissing the top of her head and squeezing her.

"God I fucking love you..."

"I love you too Billy..."

She softly said, silently playing with his necklace against his wet sleek chest.

Later...

July had grabbed a pair of her dad's PJ bottoms for Billy, and she changed into a baggy comfy T-shirt. They both were exhausted from earlier, crawled into July's bed underneath the covers, the sheets still faintly smelling of their earlier events. Billy turned over, wrapping his massive arms around her, before bringing her in tight. July kissed his hand, before holding it and sighing a deep breath of relief. Billy smiled, staring at the back of her head, fighting back tears.

"July?"

"Hum?"

"I really...really fucking love you."

"I love you too..."

Billy smiled, before kissing the back of her head, and shutting his eyes, allowing sleep to take over him as he drifted off, the woman he loved laying in his arms.

Later that week...

Billy grumbled, sitting in his bedroom with July the day before she was due to start chemo. Since his passionate night with July, somehow he actually felt there might be a chance at happiness for him. He didn't return that weekend until the next afternoon the following day. The two had slept in each other's arms until almost nine, when both woke, lazily smiling at each other. They opted for taking a nice hot shower to wake up, both undressed, and spent half the time kissing, and fooling around then actually showering. It wasn't until the water turned cold, that they got out dripping wet, taking turns with July's hair dryer, and drying each other off with fresh towels. They changed, Billy putting back the same clothes he had worn to her house last night. Both went downstairs, and July made them pancakes on her mother's griddle. They ate in the kitchen, both playfully kicking each other underneath the table. Billy saw a drop of syrup still on July's lip, and leaned over, and licked it. Pressing his forehead against hers, he smiled, before he smiled.

"Last night was fucking amazing."

July smiled.

"If you ask me, that was my first time...for sure."

She saw Billy's eyes up, and knew this meant the world. In his own way, he had beat Steve yet again. It was foolish, but she knew he felt threatened by Steve since he was the first guy she slept with. He laughed, kissing her again, deeply, tasting the maple syrup from the pancakes, before he broke the kiss, and locked eyes with her.

"I also...wanted to thank you...for...listening last night. I hope you don't..."

She shook her head, cutting him off.

"Thank you for trusting me, and thank you for being my boyfriend...means a lot that I have somebody to make me feel better during this. I don't feel as nervous knowing you'll be there with me this week when I start."

Billy reached behind her, cupping the side of her head, and lightly rubbing her ear with his thumb. He smiled, feeling a strange rumbling in his chest. This happened whenever he felt tears coming. He struggled, trying not to be a wimp and ruin this beautiful morning before he had to go home and face the cold reality of Neil harping on him. He pressed his head harder against hers, closing his eyes and sighing.

"God...where did you come from?"

July lightly laughed, before she kissed him. Now a few days later, he had invited her over. In passing she had unofficially met his dad, and Billy wanted to keep it that way, Neil had made him uncomfortable as he looked he up and down and remarked.

"So you're the girl my boy has been spending all this time with. Hope you're feeling better."

Billy controlled his temper as July stayed polite. He knew she didn't like him, but nevertheless didn't want to cause problems for him. She

smiled, shook his hand and said it was pleased to meet him, ignoring his other comment, that she knew he really didn't mean. Besides that, Billy tried to stick to mostly going over across the street. July and him were always going whenever Neil was always just coming home. He knew Thanksgiving was coming up, and wanted so badly to spend it with July and her family, who seemed like his real family even though he hadn't met her father yet, but he could all ready tell that he was probably just like Mrs. Criss. Easy going, kind, and decent. Just like his wife, and just like his daughter. Today July had come over after Billy complained that his newest science paper seemed impossible. She said science was actually pretty easy for her, and came over by surprise less than ten minutes after they hung up. Billy knew she was nervous about starting her next round of chemo tomorrow, and wanted to be strong and supportive for her, just as she had the night they slept together and then went in the tub where he told her about the real reasons behind the move from California. He told Max she was skating home, which she mumbled fine. He planned on heading straight to the clinic, attached to the hospital where around three-thirty she would start. She told him usually her mother sat with her, and said she would stay with her until he came. It usually only took an hour or two, then she had to stay another hour to be monitored before being able to go home. Billy insisted he went, and drive her back. She had warned him about how boring, and then gross it could yet, but Billy wouldn't be scared off that easily. He told her he was going and that was that. When she rang the bell, Max answered. She didn't treat Max any differently after hearing the story of her. Instead she smiled, floating in a long sleeve olive blouse, jeans, and boots.

"Hey Max." Max shot her a look, before sighing, dropping the attitude.

"Hey July...want me to get him?"

"Could you?"

"Yeah sure, come on in..."

July smiled thanking her before Max yelled.

"BILLY! IT'S YOUR GIRLFRIEND!"

Girlfriend...

July smiled at the sound of that word, before Billy came out of his bedroom, puffing on a cigaret, before looking surprised she was there. Usually the plan always was after dinner he would cross the street and see her unless Neil was in one of his moods. Billy smirked as Max grabbed her skateboard that was leaning against the wall.

"I'm gonna go skate..."

Billy didn't take his eyes off July, but barked an order at Max.

"Stay in the driveway."

Max was about to argue, but decided against it. Since that night at Will's house he had backed off a great deal. She figured it was because for the first time in forever she had stood up to him. Whatever this frightening overprotective craziness had been lifted. He still kept an eye out for her, but no longer cared who she hung out with, or that she was now 'dating' Lucas. He honestly didn't seem to no longer care. She knew a huge part of this originally started was because of Neil. He held him responsible for her, and she had witnessed some pretty intense beatings for the littlest thing. She remembered a year or so ago, long after her and her mother had moved in with them. Neil and Susan had been married going on three years then, and Max and Billy actually got along pretty good. He had taught her how to skate, bought her the very same skateboard he had snapped last week when she made the comment about July. They used to drive to the beach together, play boardgames, rent movies, laugh, actually get along like they did the humiliating night she got her period.

She hated he had been acting like such a jerk since she really hadn't gotten the chance to thank him. In fact, his behavior had become downright frightening. This was even before he met July. Since the move he had targeted Max, and she believed Neil sensed that Billy blamed her and that's why he had made him responsible for driving her around, and keeping an eye out on her. She thought of the day he nearly ran over Mike, Lucas, and Dustin. She thought of how many times he snapped, and how badly they had been fighting. She thought about how scared she got the day in the parking-lot when she had

gotten into an argument with Lucas, and got into Billy's car upset and instantly he knew. She hated his little "pep" talk, and how he had grabbed her wrist. She felt this was just a building up of emotions ready to explode. He did hate her for what she did causing them to move. She knew he hated her for telling the secret, resulting in what happened with Ms. Glenn, and them having to move, forcing Billy to leave everything he ever knew behind. She had a feeling the only reason he was half way decent to her the night she got her period was because she had noticed a change in him since he started seeing July. July wasn't like Ms. Glenn. She understood now those stupid 'feelings' were wrong, and she had acted like a spiteful little brat, wanting to hurt him simply because he didn't like her back. In that brief time she felt she had matured more, and viewed Billy as a troubled guy, an asshole really, who tried to act so tough, but really when it came down to it cried like a baby whenever his dad pushed him down or kicked him. He of course would save these tears until he walked away, but there had been many times Max had heard him softly weeping through the wall that separated their rooms.

She knew whatever this was with July it wouldn't end well. She had overheard her mother and Neil talk. July was sick, real sick. She had seen it the night the huge fight happened between Steve and him. She knew she was dying, and maybe at best had a few months. Whatever decent part of Billy was left would completely crack and crumble once something happened to her. Still, she wished so badly that Billy knew the truth about this town. Maybe, just maybe he would understand and ease up a little. Still, she remembered the wild look in his eyes, and how that night at Will's she was actually afraid he was going to black out and kill Steve. She couldn't believe she had used the syringe, but some surge entered her. She felt she had paid her debt for what she did resulting in the move. They were even now. He couldn't push her, or her friends around like this anymore, and made sure he knew she meant business when she used the bat less than an inch away from his crotch. Since then, mostly after he went to the hospital with July they barley spoke. Still, Sunday morning she was surprised to find a brand new skateboard waiting for her just outside her bedroom door. Her mother had gone out shopping, and Neil was working overtime. When she woke up, she couldn't believe it.

She knew Billy had spent the night across the street, doing God knows what with July (she tried to ignore the tiny pang of jealousy she was pushing down) when she picked up the skateboard. It was brand-new, in fact one she had been eyeing downtown since they first got here. She turned it over in amazement, before she heard music coming from the driveway. Tucking it under her arm, she walked out the front door to find Billy in his denim jacket looking at the engine of his car, music playing from inside on the radio as he wiped his hands on a rag. Max wasn't too sure if this was a signal to show he was putting up a white flag and apologizing. Did this mean the awkward unspoken hate between them could end? Max wasn't so sure. She took a deep breath and walked down the steps to him, before clearing her throat.

"What's this?"

She hoped he could hear over the radio. Billy half turned, and looked at her, pretty uninterested. Still, something looked different in his eyes.

He seemed...happy.

Still, he wore a stone-set expression.

"To replace your other one."

Max really didn't know what to say. She wondered if this had been July's idea and Billy had swung by the department store after leaving her place earlier. Instead she gave a small smile.

"Thanks..."

"Yeah well, don't break your fucking arm on it..."

He turned back around to work on his car, signaling that they were done talking. Max sighed, before looking down at the board and grinning. She couldn't wait to show the guys later. Turning around, she ran back inside to change, now knowing that Billy had looked over his shoulder when she ran back into the house and smirked himself. Once Max returned ten minutes later in jeans and a long sleeve T-shirt, and started practicing how to balance on it, loving the

smooth feeling of brand new wheels. Twice she nearly fell, when she heard Billy's deep voice behind her.

"That's now how I showed you, remember, balance in the center...like a surfboard."

She glanced over and Billy was watching her. She suddenly remembered back in California when he had taught her how to practice back on her old board he had broken. Pushing those memories away, she nodded, trying not to give him attitude, before standing in the center. Billy watched her for another moment, before turning back to his car. Now the next day he told Max to stay in the driveway. She wanted to shoot him a look, but shrugged and walked out, shutting the door behind her. July smiled, sticking her hands in the front pockets of her jeans.

"Did she like the skateboard?"

July didn't know Billy had been the one to break her old one, and he intended on keeping it that way. Billy nodded, before July smiled and walked over.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about the other night..."

"That makes two of us firecracker..."

She stood on her tiptoes, softly kissing him, before she smiled through the kiss and cocked her head to the side.

"Now, tell me about this paper that's due."

Later...

July had helped a ton. They had cracked open the books, and while Billy got frustrated, July was calm and took a highlighter and showed him exactly what to use as notes as she tore out different pieces of notebook paper, and helped him start a rough outline. Now a half an hour later as much as Billy didn't like it, he actually was getting the hang of it. He sat on his bed, looking from the notes July helped him write down, to his other notebook where he was writing in his sloppy handwriting his rough draft before letting July take a look at it. He had put on some music, and July laid across the other end bouncing

her leg to the beat, which Billy found completely adorable.

She had taken one of his notebooks, and was sketching with a pencil. After about an hour July grabbed Billy's wrist and frowned, saying she had to get back.

"Sure you don't wanna stay for dinner?"

He hated to see her leave. July leaned over and lightly kissed his lips.

"Wish I could but my mom wants me to get to bed early for tomorrow."

"That's okay, dinner with my dad really isn't something you need before your big day tomorrow. I'll meet you there after I get out of school. I really outta ditch..."

July wrinkled her nose and gave him a look.

"Don't you dare. This paper is coming out awesome, I'll help you make a final draft at the end of the week."

Billy kissed her again before noticing her sketches. He lifted an eyebrow.

"Hey what's that?"

He plucked it off the bed and held it. July blushed.

"Oh it's just some stupid sketch, just got a few ideas looking around your room..."

Billy smirked. It was a skill, it's mouth open smoking a cigarette.

"That supposed to be me?"

July cracked up completely, slightly rolling over on the bed.

"Yeah totally..."

"Well, I love it and I'm keeping it."

He smiled down at her, before he saw a change in her eyes.

"What's the matter?"

July sighed, staring up at him.

"I know it's stupid...I've been through this before...but I'm scared about tomorrow Billy. I'm really scared..."

Billy frowned, before leaning down, earring darling before he softly kissed his forehead. Lifting his head, he sighed and stared down at her.

"Don't be. I'll be right beside you the entire time...remember?"

He reached and squeezed her hand, as she sadly smiled and nodded. Wanting to cheer her up, Billy picked up the piece of paper with July's sketch on it and waved it in front of her.

"You know what? I think I might get this tattooed on me this spring...would look pretty bad ass huh?"

July laughed shaking her head.

"You're nuts you know that?"

Billy smirked before leaning down again to kiss her.

"Yeah, nuts about you..." With that, they kissed.

10. Winter

"Sweetie, you want a popsicle?"

The friendly middle aged nurse asked July as she sat in her chair in the chemo room. Billy sat beside her, having arrived less than a half an hour ago, switching places with July's mother, who said she would be back in two hours to drive her home. Billy was surprised by how well lit, and "friendly" the place seemed. It was part of Hawkins hospital, and once he went to the main desk asking where July Criss was, Mrs. Criss, who had gone to get herself a cup of coffee ran into him. She gave him a big hug, and deep down inside Billy instantly felt at ease. She walked him down the hall, explaining she all ready made sure at the front desk that he was on July's list for visitors whenever she was getting an infusion. She thanked him again for being so sweet and coming to sit with her. She told him this was July's third time doing chemotherapy, and the last time really knocked it out of her. She didn't want to say anything, but she suspected that July was nervous. Having him here meant a lot. She brought him past another desk, where she greeted the nurse named Ellen, and brought him into the room where there were a large circle of leather hospital issued chairs that reclined, along with other plastic chairs for guest. There were TVs bolted onto the wall, and plants near the windows that over looked the courtyard. Billy right away spotted July and his heart fluttered in his chest. He had been really nervous worrying about her, but seeing her sitting in her chair, hooked up to what appeared to be a regular IV bag on a pole, his fears seemed to ease up. Maybe chemo wasn't this big bad monster he had made up in his head. Mrs. Criss brought him over.

"Look at what a nice boyfriend you have, taking the afternoon to sit with you instead of doing boring crossword puzzles with your mother."

July smiled, and playfully stuck her tongue out at her mom, who laughed and got Billy to sit down beside her. She leaned over to July kissing her forehead, and told her if she needed her, she would be home and back in two hours to pick her up. Billy raised an eyebrow.

"I have my car, I can drive her back no problem."

July wrinkled her nose and sighed.

"I get pretty sick to my stomach after these treatments, best if I keep the upchuck out of your car..."

"I don't mind, screw the car...you know that..."

July smiled and patted Billy's arm.

"You're sweet, but just the same I'll have my mom pick me up okay?"

Billy shrugged.

"Sure, whatever."

Mrs. Criss said her goodbyes before grabbing her purse and leaving. July, who wore sweats and another baggy T-shirt sighed and looked at him.

"No offense, just a comfort thing. Okay?"

Billy smirked before nodding.

"No problem kiddo...so how you doing?"

July shrugged and motioned to her arm where the IV was going into.

"Well, I'm almost radioactive and ready for Mars."

Billy laughed softly, before eyeing the four or five other patients. Two were very old and frail looking, the other three older, and bald, one woman had a scarf wrapped around her head. None of them looked like July. Looking at her he smirked.

"Missed you..."

"I missed you too."

He leaned over, very aware that despite the other patients talking to their guests, or reading, or pretending to watch TV, they were glancing over in this direction. He decided to say fuck it, and give them a show. He leaned over, and deeply kissed July, being careful not to lean against the tube going into her arm. The kiss was long,

and once it broke, an old man across the way whistled. Both July and Billy laughed as everyone around them smiled, looking very much amused.

Later...

"You want a popsicle sweetie?"

Ellen the nurse asked. July, who had been a good sport sitting back, talking with Billy mostly about his day at school, smiled.

"Thought you would never ask..."

Ellen offered the box, where July leaned and dug in before pulling one out, still wrapped in it's white wrapping.

"Popsicle honey?"

Ellen offered the box to Billy who glanced around and saw most of the patient's guests were all sucking on them. Shrugging, he pulled one out.

"Sure, why not."

Ellen smiled and motioned to July as Billy took her popsicle and unwrapped it for her, before unwrapping his.

"This your boyfriend sweetie?"

July blushed and laughed.

"Yeah, Billy, this is Ellen, she's been with me since I first started chemo a few years back. Ellen, this is my boyfriend Billy."

Ellen smiled.

"Your right, he is cute."

July cracked up completely as Billy blushed a little and grinned.

"Thanks..."

Ellen winked before walking back to her desk. Billy turned towards

July who was sucking on her cherry flavored popsicle. He grinned and licked his grape one. He whispered to her...

"Gotta say lady, you sure make that popsicle look good."

July rolled her eyes and playfully swatted Billy's leg.

"Yeah well, I might as well...during chemo we really can't do anything besides me servicing you."

Billy raised an eyebrow.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, since I have so many chemicals in my body we can't have sex for a few weeks."

Billy made a face.

"Bummer..."

"But we can still do other stuff..."

July playfully licked her popsicle, as Billy cracked up completely, causing the other patients to glance over. Both July and Billy leaned against each other, laughing, before finally they settled down, sampling each other their popsicles, before finishing. Billy tossed out the wooden sticks, and sat back down, eyeing the IV bag, and all the machines and equipment. He looked at July, before sadly smirking, and reaching down rubbing her thigh.

"Does it hurt?"

July glanced at the tube running into her hand and shrugged.

"Not really. Usually the first couple of times it doesn't really bother me, but the doctor said my immune system is lower, so it might affect me differently. I get pretty sick, I throw up a lot...get tired...it's pretty gross."

Billy looked at her. His eyes studied her pale face, her light peach colored lips, her long lashes, and her hair done up as always, tiny

strands fallen to each side of her face. Still, he couldn't believe that she was sick. She didn't look sick, no

"What?"

Billy smiled before reaching and squeezing her hand.

"You're just...incredible."

July made a face, rolling her eyes.

"Oh please. I also wanna get this out of the way. I have this three times a week, and you won't...I repeat won't be coming every time. You have basketball practice, and homework, and your sister to drive. My mom will be with me watching that stupid General Hospital program on the TV."

Billy smirked.

"Yeah well, I'm coming every Tuesday, and Wednesday. Don't have practice on those days, and I'll drop Max off first."

"But Billy homework..."

"I'll bring it with me. Besides, you can help me with these stupid essays and I can bore you to death with it."

July laughed before shaking her head.

"I don't want to cause any problems with your father..."

"Neil can go screw himself. You're my girlfriend and a few hours two days a week isn't going to kill him."

"Billy, it's your senior year...you shouldn't be sitting here watching me get chemicals pumped into me. Like I said, I get sick and it's really a turnoff..."

Billy reached and firmly squeezed her cheeks with his hand as he forced her to look at him. His eyes actually angry, and his voice low and stern.

"I don't know how many times I need to explain this to you, but you're not getting rid of me that easy. I'm fucking crazy about you...I've...told you things I've never told anybody, and you're gonna get better...and we're gonna graduate, and we're gonna head down to California together..."

July smiled, pulling back from his grip, before taking his much larger hand, and kissing the knuckles.

"We're gonna open a surf shop right?"

Billy smiled and shook his head.

"No, you'e gonna study marine biology. I'll teach surf lessons, or maybe be a lifeguard..."

"I could see you being a lifeguard. You would look sexy."

Billy shook his head laughing as he went on, lacing his hand with hers.

"We'll get a place on the beach, and finally once you get a killer job after you graduate at like Sea World or something...we'll save up and open a surf shop. Every Friday night we'll party on the beach and dance..."

July raised an eyebrow.

"Dance? You dance?"

Billy made a face.

"I'm probably one of the best dancers you'll ever meet."

"Oh really?"

"Yep. Wait until I show you. I'm telling you July, it's gonna be awesome. We'll do wild things, take trips, get tattooed, watch the sunrise every Sunday morning. Have sex in the surf, blast our music, race my car down the highways...and get married, right on the beach, with all our friends watching."

July laid her head back on the chair and smiled, looking a little tired, just enough for Billy to notice. She smiled.

"July Hargrove...got a nice ring to it..."

"Right? We'll have a totally killer wedding. Just the way we want it, just one giant party. We'll honeymoon in Vegas, and work on starting a family..."

July smiled, tracing her thin fingers against the top of his hand.

"Oh yeah? How many?"

"Four."

Billy grinned as July's made a face, eyes widening.

"Four!"

Billy chuckled. looking down at her.

"Three boys, one girl."

July sighed, staring at him.

"Sounds like the perfect life..."

"It will be. I promise."

Billy picked her hand up, squeezing it again before kissing it. Both locked eyes, completely, and hopelessly in love.

One month later...

"I'm gonna cum, baby I'm gonna cum..."

Billy moaned, sitting in the driver's seat of the Camaro, parked near the quarry, one extremely chilly cold December Friday afternoon, the day school let out for Christmas break. It has been a busy last month. July was in the middle of her chemotherapy, three days a week, fighting like Hell. Billy made good on his promise by being there every Tuesday and Wednesday. He would drop Max off either at home or the arcade, a strange unspoken tension had settled over the two of

them, and both barley spoke. Still, Max was relieved this so called "war" between them had finally ended, and he now knew they were even. She wasn't allowing herself or her friends to be pushed around by hm. Instead, he drove her around, always told her coldly when he would be coming back to pick her up. She caught him a few times watching her use her new skateboard on the street and smirk.

Somehow this made their very rocky few years together now seem better. Just last week, Max put on her new heavy winter coat. Susan had gone and bought her a brand-new one since she didn't have any since she never had needed one in California. She was riding around on her board, this time in the middle of the street, trying to make the best out of how cold her cheeks felt from the wind howling and screaming around her. She stood, pushing off, trying to avoid black ice, when suddenly, unknown to her Mr. Miller, one of their elderly neighbors who could barley see, let alone drive was pushing his Buick at a good fifty miles per hour down their street, barley seeing over the steering-wheel. Max didn't hear him coming due to the wind, when suddenly as she was about to push off on her left foot to roll across the street, a pair of strong arms reached from behind her, wrapping tightly around her, before lifting her stunned body up.

Mr. Miller unaware he nearly ran over Max continued to drive, not a care in the world, as Max was set down, her heart hammering her chest as she watched the car continue to drive down the street. Turning quickly, she saw it was Billy, having just left July's and heading across the street back home. He had seen Max ready to cross back on her skateboard, when he had lifted her from behind around the waist, and prevented her from getting hit. The skateboard rolled, but hadn't gotten run over. She saw Billy's angry and stunned expression as he continued looking at the car disappear out of sight.

"FUCKING ASSHOLE!"

He yelled, one arm still tightly around Max's waist as he raised one hand to flip the very unaware man off. After a second, he noticed he was still holding Max, before he lowered her down, his eyes avoiding contact.

"You really outta watch it, you could have gotten killed..."

He ran his hands through his hair, and crossed the street, leaving a very puzzled Max behind. She watched as he went up the driveway, and inside the house, not even bothering to turn around and look back. Sighing, a little shaken up, she walked over to her board, and flipped it up into her hands before glancing back at July's house. She knew July was really sick. She had heard her mom and July's mother Mrs. Criss talk about in last week when she came over for coffee. Max pretended she was reading her newest issue of Tiger Beat. in the den. She knew she had cancer, and from what she heard Mrs. Criss said it was spreading. They were hoping to do chemo until February, but something about July's levels weren't looking good. Her mother had asked about maybe taking the tumor out as an open? Mrs. Criss explained that the tumor was so big and spreading, that it would probably kill her on the operating table if they tried. She had heard Mrs. Criss' words breaking up a bit, and she could tell she was crying. This instantly made her feel uncomfortable.

Her mother as always comforted her, telling her how sorry she was. She heard the sound of Mrs. Criss blowing her nose, before thanking her, and telling her how strong July had been during this whole thing. Still, she noticed how weak and thin she was getting, and simply said that her husband and her had came to terms that they probably wouldn't have their little girl much longer. She heard her own mother now weeping, telling her how sorry she was, before Mrs. Criss said that a huge reason July was doing even remotely good was because of Billy. She had never really had any serious boyfriends before, but seeing the two of them together gave her hope. Billy sometimes was the only person that could make her laugh, and take her mind off the endless stream of medications, and doctor visits. Max hated the tiny flickering piece of jealousy she felt, but pushed it away. July was a good person, and she knew how much Billy cared for her. He went to the hospital twice a week while she got her injections, or whatever they were called.

He went over her house almost every night, and when July was too sick, he would spent an hour or two on the phone in his bedroom. She had also noticed a slight difference in Billy's attitude. Part of her wanted to believe that maybe it was a change of heart. That, maybe that night at Will's had scared him when she stood up to him, making sure he knew that she wasn't going to spend the rest of her life paying

for what happened back in California. But she knew the real reason was because of July. It wasn't like the trashy girls who drooled all over him when they first came here to Hawkins. July was different, and as much as she wanted to claim she didn't care, she did feel bad this was happening to her. July had even insisted that Billy bring her over one day so they could play video games. Billy sat across the way reading a car magazine while Max and her played Super Mario Brothers, sitting side by side. She saw how pale July looked, and how mid-way through the game Mrs. Criss brought her a whole handful of different pills of all shapes and colors. That afternoon had been sorta fun, while Billy acted distant and annoyed. Before leaving, Billy went to the bathroom when July smiled and asked if she was dating anybody? Max blushed a little and admitted that she liked Lucas and was going to go to the Snow Ball Ball with him. July actually seemed excited, not the fake kind, before she told Max she wanted her to have her video game system. Max's eyes grew big before she shook her head.

"No way, I couldn't..."

July nodded and started to wrap up the controllers.

"I don't play anymore, the screen gives me a headache..."

She motioned to her nose which had started to bleed, where she grabbed a tissue from her pocket and wiped her nose.

"I all ready had my mom talk to your mom. It's all yours, plus the three other games I have. It's all in the box by the TV. Just unplug it and it's yours."

Max suddenly felt guilty, and deep down inside she knew the real reason why she was doing this. Not because she wanted to suck up to Max, or felt bad. No, she was giving her video games away because she knew deep down inside she was dying and wanted to be nice. Sadly smiling, she didn't think before she wrapped her arms tightly around July's thin shoulders and hugged her tight.

"Thank you..."

July smiled, patting her back and hugging her in return.

"Just have fun, and invite Lucas over one night. Boys love that."

Max laughed as she pulled back before Billy came back, looking annoyed and asked if she was ready to go home, it was almost dinner time. Max looked at July before smiling and nodding. She got up and started to pack up the game system, and Billy didn't even bat an eyelash. She suspected he knew all about July's plans to give this to her all along. Billy went over to July while Max was finishing packing up everything, and she glanced over seeing Billy look down at July as he gently wiped her nose where it had been bleeding.

"You okay?"

He whispered, sounding concerned. Max, feeling like she was spying, grabbed the box and stood up before clearing her throat.

"Um, I'm gonna head back first...I'll see you there..."

She didn't wait to see what he would say. instead, she hurried out the door, before calling back thanks to July and walked out. That night she hooked the video game system to the TV, wowing her mother and Neil as she showed them the games. Billy had come home for dinner, but had gone and showered, before going into his room to call July. Neil, who was on his third beer muttered that it was a good thing Billy was still keeping up with his chores, because he was spending far too much time with that girl. Susan sighed, and tried to explain they made a sweet couple, and it was nice seeing him be so supportive to her. Still, Neil didn't seem impressed, and continued drinking.

On Thanksgiving Neil forbid Billy to spend the entire holiday over at the Criss'. He explained to Billy who had just finished trimming the hedges before the first frost settled in, that this was their first holiday here and he would be damned if he insulted Susan by spending the entire day over somebody else's house. Billy knew there was no sense in arguing, so instead figured out a deal that would somehow work out. He would spend the morning and afternoon home, as much as he hated it. They didn't have any family really back in California, so there was nobody to visit, nor have come over. Billy was bullshit over the entire thing, thinking it was stupid. But he knew if he pushed the issue, Neil would somehow make it impossible for him to even see

her that day just to be a prick. So, it was finally allowed in the end that Billy could go over across the street at six for desert.

That was it. Billy figured it was better than nothing. The holiday itself was boring. He found himself, wearing a button up dark blue shirt, his hair styled back, as he wore his dark dress jeans, and helped Susan set the dinning room table up since the chairs had still be in storage in the shed out back. Neil drank beers and watched football, and Max sat in the kitchen putting marshmallows on the yams. Dinner happened, and Billy actually found he had a pretty good appetite. Neil was drunk, but luckily wasn't being a complete asshole to Billy. He was eager to get back to the game, and ended up making a plate for himself and used one of the folding TV dinner trays they kept in the spare closet, so he could eat and watch. Billy was grateful he didn't invite him to watch the game. Billy only liked basketball, and hated hockey, football, and baseball.

He was terrible at sports besides basketball, which he figured he wouldn't even stick with since it was more of a hassle than anything else. Currently he just liked playing to kick that little shit Steve's ass and embarrass him in front of everyone. He somehow got some unspoken satisfaction that Steve had fallen on hard luck. He was no longer Mr. popular at the Hawkins High. His little prissy girlfriend had broken up with him, and everyone knew how hard he had taken the entire breakup. He thought he might completely lose it when he heard Steve had swung by last week to check in on July. He had only spent twenty or so minutes, but Billy had gotten home just as Steve's car was leaving. Rushing over right away, he found July lounging on the sofa in tights, leg warmers, and Billy's wine colored button down shirt that she absolutely loved, and had borrowed to lay around in.

He nearly fell through the front door, using his key that Mrs. Criss had given him, to find a very puzzled looking July staring up at him from the sofa, remote in hand. At a loss for words, he stared at her before asking if everything was okay? July laughed and said of course it was. Billy hurried over, sitting down beside her and made a face.

"What was that asshole Steve doing here? You're mom is out shopping right?"

July rolled her eyes.

"He swung by for a few minutes to see how I was doing and catch me up on school dirt. I feel so bad, Nancy dumped his ass for that Jonathan kid can you believe it?!"

Billy stared at her, before July rolled her eyes.

"You aren't jealous are you?"

Billy was tempted to shout, to freak out, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead, he sighed and rubbed her leg, playing with her leg warmer.

"No...maybe...I don't know."

"You're sweet, but you know we're just friends, now stop being an idiot and kiss me."

Billy laughed, seeing how foolish he was being, before he made a face.

"Sorry, I guess I'm just being stupid..."

July smiled, when suddenly she made a face, her all ready pale looking complexion, draining any color that was left.

"Billy I..."

In lighting speed she shot up, and jumped up from the sofa. Running, she sprinted down the small hallway, flinging open the bathroom door. Billy jumped up, worried, before hurrying behind her. When he went to the bathroom, he saw July kneeling in front of the toilet, vomiting. Billy frowned. He had seen a slight change in July with the chemo in the last week or so. He noticed little changes, tiny ones. There were circles underneath her eyes, brownish purplish ones. He noticed she had no appetite, even after one of her appointments, he brought her downtown for ice cream. They parked behind the old movie theater, both sitting on the hood, eating the cones despite the cold water. He noticed how peckish she was being, when usually she would woof down an ice cream and even start eating his. Instead she barley finished hers. He noticed when he came to her treatments, she seemed tired, but wanted to focus on helping him with his homework then anything else. He noticed how frail she felt in his arms, and how

tried she seemed...

He wanted to ignore it, but it was there. He hated too see it was wearing her down. He noticed just he day before that the treatments were making her get painful sores on the insides of her mouth. They hurt so bad, that while they looked over his text books during her treatments, she would chew on ice chips, claiming she was perfectly fine. Still, he worried. Even at night when he spoke to her on the phone, he could tell by her slight slurring, that she was on heavy duty pain pills. She seemed out of it, or just downright tired. Still, whenever he could, he would go over, and sometimes the two of them would just lay in her bed watching MTV in silence. He was horny, and wanted her badly, but knew she needed time to heal. Instead, he would wrap his arms around her, smelling her shampoo, and gently rub her back. Each night, she would hug him so tight, he thought she would never let him go.

"I love you sooo much..."

She would whisper, almost as if it would be the last time she would ever speak to him. Billy never told anyone this, but it terrified him. He knew he couldn't lose her. That day he knelt down with her as her back arched, and she violently vomited, gagging as it flew into the bowl of the toilet. Not even the slightest bit phased by it, he grabbed a facecloth and ran it under the cold water of the tap from the sink, and sat down beside her. He waited until she finished, holding her hair back, as she moaned and continued to vomit. Finally after a few minutes she stopped, collapsing back, panting as beads of sweat rolled off her. Hating to see her like this, he reached and flushed for her, before he scooted over and used the damp cloth to wipe her mouth. Instantly, July stared at him, and her lip quivered. She looked embarrassed, as well as exhausted.

"This is so gross...I'm so sorry..."

Billy smirked as he continued cleaning her face.

"Shut up, you're fine..."

July tried to laugh, before her eyes widened, and he knew she was going to go again. He nodded, pulling her hair gently back, and

positioned her as she began round two. By the time Mrs. Criss came home, Billy had carried her upstairs to her room. He put a wastepaper basket which kept under her desk near by, and got her a glass of water. He covered her up, rubbing her back, and soothing her, telling her over and over again that it was okay. Deep down inside, he hated himself for thinking it, but was glad he was here for her instead of Steve when this happened...

Since then he noticed how hard the chemo had gotten to her. Even last week, she began to violently vomit at the clinic. Ellen the nurse hurried over, with a plastic kidney dish for her to throw up in. Billy had seen other patients throw up here, but it broke his heart to see this happen to her. Thanksgiving had been Hell since he knew she was having such a hard time. Mrs. Criss reminded him this was expected since this was her third round of it, and as always roughly around this time it really hit her hard. He had seen her last night when he swung by the house with roses for her. Mrs. Criss gushed over how sweet it was, and remarked that her husband would be home tomorrow and was dying to meet Billy finally. July meanwhile was stoned on her pills. She wore another shirt of Billy's, since she claimed it made her feel better at night, like he was with her since they smelled of him. This one was an old faded torn T-shirt from when he saw Van Halen two years ago. It was one of his favorite most worn T-shirts, but he gave it to July since she constantly loved borrowing it.

He saw she was stoned, and hated seeing the trash bin Mrs. Criss had set up for her in case she got sick. He had explained that he would be by for desert, and Mrs. Criss who was busy cooking in the kitchen said that was fabulous, and took Billy aside, and told him it meant a lot to July, everything he was doing. She told him she admitted how guilty she felt, and seemed pretty depressed. Mrs. Criss disappeared inside the kitchen. Alone, Billy sat down next to July and motioned to the roses, now in a crystal vase Mrs. Criss had put into them.

"I tried to find a dozen plastic sharks at that general store, no such luck."

July cracked a smile, and Billy knew she was still there, underneath the heavy thick coat of medication.

"You okay firecracker?"

July shrugged, the circles under her eyes looking darker.

"Just frustrated..."

"About what?"

"I'm in love with the man of my dreams, and...I'm too sick to enjoy it. How's that?"

Billy snaked an arm around her, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head.

"Listen, I fucking love you, so cut the bullshit okay?"

July lightly laughed, but Billy's heart broke for her. He couldn't even begin to think of what Hell she was going through. He knew if there was anyway...he would switch places with her in a second. The next day, he spent tiptoeing around Neil who was drinking, and thankfully more interested in the football game than spending time with them. Billy ate a great deal, while Max picked at her plate, and kept making puzzled expressions at him. Susan was the one who did most of the talking, mostly about the church baking contest she had entered, the ladies downtown, and the sales that were popping up at the market. She mentioned talk of that huge shopping mall opening later this spring, and continued to go on and on about how wonderful it would be to have that big of a mall nearby. After dinner, Billy and Max helped clear and wash the dishes, while Susan made a huge plate of leftovers for July's family. "I also baked a pumpkin and apple pie, you can bring one over for desert. Please say hi to everyone!" Billy nodded, before muttering a thanks. Susan asked which one he wanted? Billy said whichever one she thought he should take. Going into his bedroom, he stood in front of the mirror, fussing with his hair before shrugging on his leather jacket and walking out.

Neil was passed out in front of the television and and Max and Susan were in the kitchen with a giant puzzle spread out on the kitchen table. Ever since Billy could remember since Neil and Susan became involved, every holiday Susan and Max would do a puzzle together. Billy often wondered about this, remembering his own little

traditions with his mother, but never asked about it simply because...he didn't care. Susan pointed to the pumpkin pie and the three stacks of plates with tinfoil on them.

"Have fun, and remember to say hi to everyone!"

Billy nodded, catching Max's eyes staring, before he dropped them remembering that giant baseball bat with the nails hammered into them. He shook his head, muttered a thanks to Susan, and grabbed the plates before leaving. The night air was crisp and cool, and he saw a new truck in July's driveway. He prayed Mr. Criss wasn't a jerk, and was at least halfway as nice and easy going as Mrs. Criss was. After all, he was in love with this guy's daughter... When he arrived, he rang the bell and was greeted by Mr. Criss. He was a man in his late forties, sandy colored hair, and a graying beard. He had July's eyes for sure, and they lit up the second he saw him, holding a can of beer. "Hey! Pleased to meet you Billy, I've heard so much about you." He offered his hand and Billy smirked, balancing the plates before he shook Mr. Criss' warm, yet firm handshake.

"Come in! Come in son!" By the end of the evening, Billy knew he liked both Mr. and Mrs. Criss equal.

July looked pretty in a striped black dress and tights. Her hair was done in a braid, and he saw very light makeup on her. She sat on the sofa, nursing a can of gingerly. Mr. Criss was jolly, friendly, and very funny. He instantly put Billy at ease, cracking jokes, and talking about the airlines. He even invited Billy out back for a can of beer, where he thanked him for one serious moment for keeping an eye out on his daughter. It killed him that she was so sick, but from her phone calls, he knew whoever this Billy kid was, he certainly was somebody special. They all sat in the kitchen over pie, and Mrs. Criss raved out the leftovers Susan had given them, admitting that she ended up ordering dinner at an Italian restaurant from the next town over, since with Mr. Criss always working on the holidays they never made a big deal over Thanksgiving.

July was quiet, but sat beside Billy and held his hand under the table. She laughed a few times, but he could clearly tell she was stoned. After an hour, once pie was served, July asked Billy if he wanted to watch TV upstairs while her parents watched their boring late night

specials. Mr. Criss made a face, saying all these damn teenagers and those music videos were boring, before clapping Billy on the shoulder, and thanking him again for coming by. Billy, found himself for once being very polite and at ease, and thought to himself this was the kind of family he wished he could of had instead... July and him went upstairs, and shut her bedroom door. Right away Billy sighed looking at her.

"You okay?"

July shrugged. "Just tired...and a little out of it with the pills." Billy sighed staring at her. "I figured..." July turned and looked over her shoulder.

"Unzip me?"

Billy smiled and walked over, slowly unzipping her dress all the way down. He helped slowly push the dress off her shoulders, as she let it fall and pool down to her ankles. Turning, she stood in her dark purple bra and panties. Instantly he felt himself go hard down there as he gulped. Besides some heavy petting and making out, they hadn't done anything else since July said her doctor wouldn't allow sex during treatment. It drove Billy crazy, but he jerked off like there was no tomorrow, never letting on how badly this was killing him. July smiled, watching his eyes slowly look her up and down.

"You miss it don't you?"

Billy snapped out of his trance.

"What?"

"Sex. It isn't fair to you..."

Billy rolled his eyes as he grabbed the wrinkled up Van Halen shirt that was thrown over her chair. He handed it to her and smiled.

"Hey, all good things come to those who wait. Besides, I really don't know if there will ever be any topping of that night. I mean, I never came so hard in my life."

July cracked up, looking for a brief second like her old self. Billy

smiled as he helped pull the T-shirt over her head. She smoothed it out, before she stood on her tiptoes and lightly kissed him.

"My dad likes you a lot..."

"Yeah, he's pretty cool."

July smiled as she clicked on her TV and crawled into bed, pulling back the comforter. She patted on bed, making Billy laugh as he kicked his boots off, and crawled in beside her. Wrapping his arms around her, he settled himself down, kissing her cheek.

"You okay?"

"Good now that you're here...how was Thanksgiving at your house?"

Billy made a face.

"Eh, same old shit. Missed you like crazy."

July laid against him, and sadly smiled, staring at the TV, laying in his arms.

"I missed you too Billy..."

She snuggled up close to Billy, but he could tell by how frail she felt against him, that something was wrong...

But these last two weeks passed, and Billy was free for the next fourteen days for Christmas break. Snow hadn't hit yet, but the weatherman was talking about a pretty good storm the day before Christmas Eve. Downtown was all decorated for the holidays, and the back farm roads were slick with ice. Billy had dug into his savings, and couldn't wait to give July her Christmas present. Yet again due to his asshole father, he had to make a deal even though he knew Susan didn't even care. What it really came down to was control with his father. So, the plan was he would spend Christmas Eve with July. Her father was working again, and the plan was July and her mother would take off Christmas Day to visit her aunt down state. July's attitude had seemed to improve these last few days. Billy guessed maybe it was the Christmas spirit, even though he never felt any, but was truly excited for the first time in years because of her. He

couldn't wait to see the look in her eyes when she unwrapped her present. July didn't have treatment until the next of next week, and had asked Billy to pick her up after he got out of school early and take her someplace private.

Billy drove Max home that afternoon with what appeared to be a Snow Ball dance flyer for the middle school. Billy wanted to make some crude comment about the dance, but decided it wasn't even worth it. He dropped Max off, and picked July up who looked amazing. She had jeans on, and a fake gray and brown fur jacket on with matching earmuffs. She had those hoop earrings on that he liked, and even had worn a little lipstick. When she got in, he made sure the heat was cranking for her.

"Hey baby..."

He said as she leaned over and softly kissed him. He was surprised to feel her tongue lightly flicker against his. Yes, July seemed almost like her old self. He could faintly smell her perfume, and the moment he smelled it, he remembered the night they had sex. Visions of her laying underneath him, legs wrapped around his waist, caused him to feel his jeans grow tight. Licking his lips, he smiled at her, earring dangling.

"So? Where to?"

"Um, someplace...private."

Billy raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I have some good news for you."

"What is it?"

"You'll just have to wait until we get there."

Billy grinned, instantly becoming excited. He gunned the engine to the car, and zoomed down the street. While driving, July insisted they listen to Christmas music. Billy made pretending gagging noises as she cracked up and playfully slapped at him. After a half an hour,

they reached the quarry, before Billy pulled over and kept the engine going for the heat. Turning towards her, he smiled, putting his arm around the headrest of her seat.

"So? What's up?"

"Well, I spoke to my oncologist, and...even though my levels are so-so...he said...if I'm sexually active...I could...you know...during the break."

Billy raised an eyebrow.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I don't need to go back until next week, and my mom is going to be downtown with her girlfriends watching *It's A Wonderful Life* on Christmas Eve and won't be back until after midnight. I was planning on just being lazy, but since you're coming over...maybe we can celebrate in our own way. Now I don't know about New Years, but Christmas Eve should be safe to have sex."

"What about your levels?"

"Huh?"

July raised an eyebrow before Billy stared at her.

"How are your levels...is the chemo working."

July smiled, clearly touched.

"The levels look okay..."

"So it's working?!"

July sighed, before faking a smile and nodding.

"Yeah, it's looking good."

Billy smiled wide, reaching forward and pulling her towards him, giving her frail body a good squeeze. Kissing the top of her head, he actually seemed thrilled.

"That's great baby!"

July laughed before pulling back and looking at him.

"What do you think about...you know? Us having sex again?"

Billy smirked.

"I would love too...I mean...if you're up to it."

"I am...I've missed you."

Smiling Billy brought her in, and both deeply kissed, before July smirked, reaching down, and cupping the bulge that had formed in the crotch of his jeans. Giving it a gentle squeeze, she studied his heavy breathing before smiling.

"Let's see if I can give you an early Christmas gift..."

She slowly lowered her head, before unzipping his fly, and reached in, pulling down his underwear, before taking hold of his erect penis, and slowly lowering her mouth over it, running her tongue down his swollen shaft. Instantly Billy gasped, one hand grabbing onto the door handle, the other running through and gently grabbing the back of her head.

"Ohh...my God..."

He stared forward, eyes almost going cross, as he tried to breathe. Outside, it lightly began to snow.

Later...

"I'm gonna cum...I'm gonna cum..."

With that, Billy felt the tingling in his balls build up, before he snapped his eyes shut, one hand grabbing tightly around the door handle, and the other grabbing onto the back of her head, his fingers digging through her hair. With that, his penis twitched, and he climaxed roughly into July's wet mouth. He moaned, as he finished, feeling her swallow his cum, before he brought his hand up that had been in her hair.

That's when he froze, any sexual tingling and pleasure instantly left. He stared at his hand, and a huge clump of July's hair laid in it. July, lifted her head, wiping her mouth and smiling, before she saw what he was holding. Slowly, she reached behind herself, and ran her hand through her messy hair. Huge chunks began to fall out in clumps.

Billy sat back, too stunned to speak, before July stared at him, panic flickering in her eyes before she broke down crying, completely hysterical and terrified.

11. The cold truth

"July..."

Billy started, really shaken by what had just happened, maybe even worse than the night he found out she had the seizure. One second, they were acting like normal teenagers. Parked by the quarry, horny, wired with excitement, and messing around. He could tell by the way July announced the news of them being able to have sex again, she was thrilled, actually able to focus on something else besides the chemo, the long hours at the hospital, the medication, and being so stoned out on pills that life had lost for the moment any glimmering possibility for hope. All she wanted was to feel her age. To be a carefree teenager, plan another night together, and just fool around and feel good with her boyfriend. Billy wouldn't admit this, but he was more excited to hear from her that her doctor appointments were going well than anything else. He felt she was holding back about something, but he knew it was only a matter of time before he got it out of her. Still, he had two weeks off to spend with her. School was going okay. July had helped him so much, he actually believed he might graduate.

He had fallen into a routine of going to school, getting through the classes, holding his tongue whenever these idiots annoyed him, let steam off playing basketball, drove Max home, then to the hospital to sit with July, do his homework, get her to laugh, go home, do his chores, shower, have dinner, and try to swing by July's, or talk with her on the phone, before falling asleep. He repeated this, and truly only seemed happy whenever he was with her. He could see a change in her, and as much as he didn't want to believe she was sick, the proof was laying in his hands. July sat up, eyes watering with tears as she reached up, and started pulling at her hair, large clumps coming out, falling down on her fur jacket. Instantly he saw the panic fill her eyes as her chest began to heave.

"Oh my God, oh my God..."

Billy knew he couldn't show his own panic. Instantly he dropped the large chunk of hair in his hands, and stared at her. Tears were rolling down her face now, as her mouth opened, but no sounds escaped.

"July, it's okay, it's just hair."

July bowed her head slightly, looking at her open palms, full of her own hair.

"I've had my hair thin before because of the chemo, but never like this. Jesus..."

She reached up and continued pulling, more and more chunks coming out. Billy saw she was frantic, and shook his head. He knew he needed to be storm, and level headed during this. As much as it freaked him out, he needed to remind himself that this was happening to July. This was her body, and he knew how much she liked styling her hair. She always wore it up, but constantly was testing it, pinning it up, or. twirling it with her fingers. Now here it was, falling out of chunks, scattered all over her jeans.

"Baby, it's just hair...it's okay. You said the doc explained this time around might affect you differently. It will grow back...I promise."

July closed her eyes, and let out a haggard deep breath. That's when her shoulders sagged, and she broke down completely. Billy hated seeing her like this, and reached over, wrapping his large muscular arms around her thin body, and giving her a tight squeeze. She buried her head against his shoulder. He listened to her sobs, which sounded totally exhausted. After a solid ten minutes, she finally calms down. Pulling back, her face puffy from the tears, she sighed, sniffing before Billy gave a half smirk, and wiped her face with his hand gently. Rubbing the cheek with his thumb, he pressed his forehead against hers and sighed.

"You're beautiful no matter what."

"This is too much for you. It's too gross..."

Billy made a face.

"July, it's stupid hair."

"It's not stupid to me..."

"I know, but I don't care. So you lose your hair. I rather you lose hair

for a few months instead of you getting worse. I'll take you and we'll buy some killer wigs from that store downtown, or some scarfs I know people going through chemo do that. You'll look sexy as Hell like a little fortune teller."

July let out a small laugh through her tears, which Billy was grateful for. He laughed softly, and brushing some of her fallen hair out of her face. Most of it fell out, and fell down between them, clinging to July's fur jacket. Billy watched as July's eyes watched the fallen strands, and sighed deeply. Smiling, he held onto her shoulders.

"You know what? I'm gonna get into town, and get my stupid hair buzzed off. We can be bald together, and grow it back together."

July's eyes widened looking absolutely horrified. She shook her head, and pulled back a bit.

"NO!"

Billy blinked, not expecting this reaction. Fresh tears filled July's eyes as she shook her head.

"No, no, no, no! I love your hair. You're not cutting it off so I feel better."

"July..."

"No, I mean it Billy. You're sweet to think of doing that, but trust me...it's only going to make me feel worse. Promise me you won't touch your hair. Please."

"July..."

Fresh tears were coming from July's eyes as she reached and squeezed his hands.

"I love your hair Billy. It's one of my favorite things about you...well that and your cute ass."

Billy laughed, as July chuckled through her own tears.

"Promise me you won't cut it okay?"

Billy sighed, nervously chewing on his bottom lip for a second, deep in thought before he shrugged.

"Yeah okay, I promise."

July smiled, wiping her own eyes, before she looked down at all of the fallen hair, she seemed overwhelmed as well as just plain tired.

"I'm so sick of being sick Billy...I really gotta say that. This time around isn't like before...it's really beating me down."

Billy squeezed her hand.

"You'll kick its ass through, and we'll get through it, I promise."

July gave another half smirk, but Billy could tell her heart wasn't in it.

"Hey..."

July glanced up as Billy smiled, wanting to give anything to cheer her up.

"You're gonna beat this thing, and I'm going to be right there with you. I can't wait for Christmas Eve."

"What if I'm too sick Billy, I don't wanna ruin things..."

"If you're too sick, then I'm coming over anyways. I'll take care of you, and we'll curl up together and keep each other warm. Deal?"

July smiled, still looking so tired.

"Okay..."

"That's my girl..."

He leaned over, kissing her temple, before sitting up straight and starting the engine. He zipped his pants up, fixing himself, and drove them back to town. He brought her to the diner, where they ordered peppermint milkshakes, and sat in a booth looking out on Main Street. July had fixed her ponytail before they got out of the car, and

the way she had it you couldn't tell any had fallen out. Still, Billy closely watched her and could tell by the slightest little movements she made that she was thinking about it. Billy did anything he could to keep her mind off it. He talked about school, some stupid fights he had witnessed, what some people were up to, and Max going to the stupid Snow Ball dance.

"You should drive her."

"Huh?"

"I bet that would be awesome, Max arriving there in your Camaro. Would totally score major cool points from you."

Billy played with his straw and shrugged.

"It's not like I owe that shitty shit any favors."

July smirked.

"It would still be nice."

Billy stared across at July, who was absently tucking a huge strand of her hair behind her ear again. He knew what was on her mind. Outside the snow was beginning to pick up. Sighing, he reached across and patted her hand.

"You're thinking about cutting it off aren't you?"

July seemed to snap out of her thoughts, looking up from her shake and gave a half smirk.

"Yeah. Do you have an electric shaver?"

"I use regular razors, but I think my dad has an old one. Are you sure about this? I mean it's only a little..."

July made a face and motioned to her head.

"It's only gonna get worse and become a pain. Still wanna spend Christmas Eve with me when I'm a cue ball?"

Billy shot her a look.

"I think you'll look beautiful anyway, and if that makes you feel better, we'll do it tonight?"

"What?"

"After this, I'll drive us home. I'll swing by my place, look for the buzzer, and we'll do it together."

"Billy you don't have to..."

Billy squeezed her hand.

"I mean it." July's eyes watered for a second, looking grateful as she stared across at her boyfriend. Christmas music softly played inside the diner, as the snow outside continued to fall.

Later...

July's mother was out for the evening having gone to a Yankee Swap party at the Elk's club in town. The drive back was a little slippery, and Billy noted that he had to switch to his snow tires soon. To humor her, he switched to the station that played Christmas music non-stop, and even softly sang along to Jingle Bells when it came on. When he glanced in her direction, he saw her smiling. Taking her hand, he picked it up and kissed it. He was hell-bent to cheer her up, no matter what. When he got back, he saw that July's walkway had iced up, and told her he would also shovel and throw some rock salt down from his house. Not wanting her to slip, he hurried around his car which was parked across the street in his driveway, and told her to hop on, signaling to his back.

July laughed.

"What?!"

"You heard me, hop on!"

He laughed. July told him, he was crazy but jumped on, riding piggyback as he hurried across the street, being careful not to have his boots slip out from under them. She laughed as he held onto her

legs, bouncing her as he reached the slippery walk walk before reaching the porch. He was careful, setting her down on her feet, as she dug for her keys.

"Give me a half an hour. I'll grab the buzzer, and I gotta shovel my driveway, and yours, then I'll be in."

"Billy..."

He bent down, cutting her words off as he deeply kissed her and smiled through it. Once it broke, both smiled as he reached down and rubbed her sides.

"Go inside and warm up, it's freezing out here!"

"I'm used to it. You Mr. California, must be frozen solid!"

"I'm fine, go inside and leave the door unlocked, I'll be back soon."

He kissed her cheek, and made his way carefully back down the walkway. Watching him, July sighed. She knew she was the only person that saw this side of Billy. The sweet, caring side, that saw how broken up she was about her stupid hair, and was doing anything possible to cheer her up. She knew this round was really kicking the shit out of her. She was weak, nauseous, and the nosebleeds were getting worse. She hadn't told Billy, but she had a sit-down with her doctor and her mother and things weren't looking good. She planned on stopping the chemo by mid January. She wanted to fight, she wanted to try everything she could, but she saw that it was truly breaking her down. The little time she cherished so much with Billy was being shortened because of this. Her parents had been supportive, and they knew their only child was dying.

They wanted whatever choice she made to be on her terms. So, she didn't want to spend whatever time she had left being pumped full of chemicals, and sitting in a hospital hooked up to tubes. No, whatever time she had left, she wanted to be happy, and to make sure Billy knew it was okay to move on once she was gone. That was the most important thing. She had a few good sit downs with her mother, they were emotional, but she wanted her daughter to be happy. She told her she wanted her to get out, be with her friends, start making

future plans with dad, and to stop worrying. They had given her a wonderful life, and she couldn't be more thankful for the caring, loving, easy going, and beyond understanding parents she had been given. She knew her mother was upset, but understood her daughter's wishes. She knew she wanted to spend time with Billy before it got worse, so she agreed on being out on Christmas Eve. She wanted to make that night special. Once Billy disappeared inside, she let herself in, and went to the thermostat and turned the heat up.

The Christmas tree, that her father had bought at the local lot before leaving for yet another work trip had been decorated and set up in the living room. Smiling as she stared at it, the reality hit her that this would be her last Christmas. Sighing, she decided to get ready, and get rid of this hair once and for all. Walking to the kitchen and flipping on lights, she went to the downstairs bathroom, and turned on the vanity lights, staring at her pale reflection.

Taking her ponytail down, more hair fell out, falling into the sink. Staring down at it, July lowered her head, and softly cried.

Later...

Billy was relieved when he walked into July's house, mentally noting that he had to pick up a pair of gloves, since they were red and chapped from all of the shoveling from both his house, and hers. He was freezing, and the warmth of the inside, made him step in, close the door behind him as he cupped his hands and blew into them before rubbing them together. He looked around the dim lit living room. The Christmas tree was on, lights twinkling, before July stepped out from the dinning room. She was wearing tights, and his Van Halen shirt that nearly went down to her knees.

"Thanks for putting the salt down, you really didn't have to do that..."

"No problem, brought the buzzer."

He held it up, the cord wrapped around it. Neil thankfully wasn't home. Susan mentioned he was out with some guys from work, which was just fine to Billy. He knew his father rarely ever used the buzzer, and wouldn't notice if it was missing tonight, or had been used. Susan asked if he wanted any dinner, Billy said no thanks, and

noticed Max was on the phone laughing. Probably talking to one of her idiot friends... He made a face, and went out to the garage, and shoveled the little bit of snow that had collected outside, before salting the driveway and walkway. He then did the same across the street for July's, before returning the shovel and rock salt, before climbing the steps and letting himself back inside. July smiled, before cocking her head to the side.

"You sure you wanna do this? No offense if you wanna. I understand..."

Billy made a face walking over, shrugging off his jacket and tossing it on the sofa. Smiling, he held it up.

"Come on firecracker, let's do this."

Later...

"Ready?"

July shrugged, standing in front of Billy in the small half bathroom downstairs. The lights above the sink were on, and July had draped a towel over her shoulders. Billy had his sleeves rolled up, and clicked the buzzer on. The steady hum started, before July sadly smirked looking into the mirror at him behind her.

"Yeah."

Billy let out a deep breath, before leaning forward and began to press the buzzer right against July's head. Slowly the buzzer began cutting through the hair, sending pieces to fall down, as he focused, and in steady smooth passes, buzzed the hair off. He carefully watched July's face, ready to stop at any second if she looked as if she was ready to cry or break down. Instead, she kept a small sad smile on her face as he continued buzzing. He kept a stone set focused face as he continued to buzz off her dark once beautiful hair.

Later...

July stood in front of the mirror, and ran her hand over her scalp. She had been surprised by what a good job Billy had actually done. The hair had been buzzed down as close as he could, giving it a short

buzz cut. She had told him it didn't have to be perfect since she would probably get it cleaned up at her mother's hair dresser. Instead, Billy carefully took his time, making sure the passes were even and short. By the time finished, he wiped his hands and stood back nervous.

"Okay?"

She smiled, and admired it. She certainly did look different, but she knew it was just a matter of time before it had to be done. Sadly smiling she nodded.

"It's perfect. Thank you."

Billy leaned down, taking the towel off her shoulders, before kissing the side of her neck.

"Of course...and I gotta say, I dig the new haircut. It's hot."

July made a face.

"Yeah right..."

"No really, it's punk rock. Are you sure I can't buzz mine? I think we would look pretty kick ass."

July made a face, glancing at him.

"Touch that beautiful hair of yours and I'll kill you."

Billy chuckled, before wrapping his arms around her, and drawing her in close. Kissing her neck again, he smirked.

"What's your mom gonna say?"

July shrugged.

"Probably keep saying how great I look."

"Which you totally do."

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he lifted her off the ground, and playfully licked her neck as she squealed and laughed kicking her

legs as he dragged her out of the bathroom.

The next morning...

"Honey, wake up."

July's eyes fluttered open as her mother came in, carrying a box. July, feeling groggy from her nighttime medication, slowly sat up, and instantly her hand went to her head, feeling the close buzzed off hair. Her mother came home later last night, waking both Billy and her who had fallen asleep together on the sofa watching TV. July thought her mother would be shocked by the sight of all of her hair being gone, but instead raved about how much she loved it. She told them how much she loved it, before showing them a very ugly birdcage she won at the swap. July walked Billy to the door, kissing him goodnight as she handed him his jacket, thanking him again for what he did. Smiling, he cupped his hand behind her head, and rubbed it.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

July kissed him, and watched him leave as her mother fussed about how ugly the birdcage was, and who in the Hell would she re-gift this to? Now in the light of day, she felt foggy, and sat up, as her mother smiled carrying the box to her.

"Here you go sweetie, this was on the doorstep, I think it's from Billy."

"Huh?"

Just then the phone rang downstairs. Her mother rolled her eyes as she placed the box down on the edge of her bed.

"Let me get that sweetie, come down I'll whip you up a protein shake."

Sitting there, trying to fully wake up, she rubbed her shaved head again, before reaching and pulling the box towards her. Sighing, she saw an envelope taped to it. Ripping it off, she turned it over in her hands, before ripping one end off in a clean strip. Pulling the letter out, she unfolded it and saw Billy's handwriting.

Firecracker,

You look absolutely gorgeous. I mean it. Remember it's just hair and it grows back. This might make you feel more comfortable. See what you like. - Billy

July ripped the box open, before digging in and laughing. There were three or four different colored scarfs. Some black, some dark purple with sparkles, and another which was red. Underneath were two wings. One was a short bob cut, dark like her shade, the other made her crack up seeing that it was mid length, and all different rainbow colors. Sitting back, she actually laughed and felt truly happy for the first time in what seemed like forever.

The night of the Snow Ball dance...

Billy stopped the Camaro in front of the Hawkins Middle School Gym. The heater was on full blast, and the radio softly played a rock station. He was dropping Max off to her dance. Originally Susan was going to drive her, but Billy thought of what July had said, and decided to do the halfway decent thing and just drive her himself. He caught her looking at him while he waited for her to finish getting ready. Susan did her hair in the bathroom, and for a brief second Billy caught her staring at him. It was an unspoken look, but said volumes. Billy had been trying to be more patient and understanding ever since the night she stood up to him, and since it really hit him that July was sick. She surprised him by swinging by the house, wearing the rainbow wig. Billy cracked up completely when he answered the door, and the two went for a drive for the next hour, and ended up doing some Christmas shopping together. July wrapped her head up in the black scarf, and was surprised by how good it looked. Billy held her hand tight, as they walked by the stores.

July talked Billy into buying Max a mini radio for her bedroom.

"She'll love it, trust me."

Billy shrugged, not sure if she even deserved it. God knows the skateboard was enough. Still, as they waited to cash out. July hugged his arm.

"See if you can drive her to the dance, trust me."

Billy smirked before rolling his eyes.

"Okay. But if the little shit gives me attitude she can go screw herself."

July laughed as they continued waiting in line. Billy ended up asking Max if he could drive her. Max seemed a little caught off guard as she watched TV in the den.

"Umm...sure. Lucas' mom is driving us all back...but yeah I could use a ride."

"Okay, sure..."

Billy shrugged, leaving the den to go lift weight. Unknown to him, Max was smiling. He drove her, and kept glancing at her as she nervously pulled at her skirt, and played with her hair that Susan had done for her. Once he pulled up to the gym, he put the car in park. Max looked at him, before pulling the door open.

"Hey." Max passed and looked at him. Billy sat behind the wheel for a second, before rolling his eyes and shrugging.

"Have fun...if your ride falls through, call the house."

Max nodded.

"Sure...thanks..."

Pulling the door open, she climbed out, before slamming the door. Billy drove away, leaving a pretty stunned Max. They still weren't really talking, but at least things were better. She felt bad though, she saw July had cut all her hair off, and from what she saw on TV and in the movies, that was never a good sign. Back at the house, July came over, wearing her fake fur coat, and the same black scarf which was her favorite, tied around her head. Neil had answered the door, nursing a beer. July smiled, her breath coming out in tiny clouds from the cold.

"Hi Mr. Hargrove, is Billy home?"

Neil slowly looked her up and down.

"Lost your hair huh June?"

July gave a polite smile.

"It's July."

"Huh?"

"July. Yeah, just a side effect of my chemo."

"How's that going by the way?"

July shrugged, hands shoved deeply in the front pockets of her jacket.

"Good."

"Well, he's in his room. Come on in."

Neil stepped aside, as July smiled and walked in. Neil pointed to the hallway, really having no further interest in her as he ventured back to the den. July walked down the hallway, and could hear music playing from Billy's room. Smiling, she gently knocked on the door.

"Billy?"

The door opened, Billy stood shirtless in just jeans, his hair damp from a shower. Instantly he smirked at her.

"Hey firecracker, you're early."

"Yeah, hope you don't mind, just got bored."

Billy smiled, leaning down and kissing her.

"I still gotta shave, wanna sit with me?"

"Sure."

Billy smiled as she turned towards the bathroom as he playfully goosed her, making her laugh.

Later...

Billy stood in just his jeans in front of the bathroom mirror. He kept dipping his razor into the sink, before carefully shaving himself. July sat on the counter, slowly swinging her legs, watching him smiling.

"God I feel like a stupid school girl..."

Billy glanced at her.

"What?"

"Here I am mooning over you as you shave. Thinking to myself, man...how did I get such a hot boyfriend?"

Billy chuckled, before July scooted closer to him.

"Can I try? You did buzz my head after all?"

"Yeah?"

"I do shave my legs, I'll be careful I swear."

Billy laughed and handed her the razor, turning towards her.

"Okay..."

July smiled, positioning herself as she carefully began shaving down his throat. Billy held back from smiling, as she continued doing so. She kept dipping the razor into the sink, being careful, before finishing up. Taking the towel, she dried off his throat and face.

"Good?"

Billy turned and smiled.

"Perfect."

Scoping her off the counter, he spun her around making her laugh.

Later...

July and Billy both laid in bed, in the middle of a pretty intense

make-out session. Breaking the kiss, both breathless, Billy panted, as he took her hand and brought it down to the crotch of his jeans which had grown tight. July smiled, pressing her forehead against his.

"You still down for Christmas Eve?"

July asked, rubbing that area of his jeans slowly up and down. Billy closed his eyes smiling before nodding.

"Yeah...definitely..."

July laughed, before they heard the front door. Rolling his eyes, Billy made a face.

"That's probably Max."

"How did the ride go?"

Billy shrugged, reaching down and cupping one of her breasts over her blouse.

"It was fine. Say, I'm playing ball with some of the guys tomorrow. I guess the gym might be open for a few hours. After I'm done, how about we exchange gifts. I can't wait to show you what I got you."

July smiled and rubbed against his jeans a little harder.

"Is your present in your jeans?"

Billy laughed, leaning over and kissing her.

"Part of it."

Laughing, July continued kissing him. When they finally stopped for air, July fixed her scarf and smiled across at him.

"Have fun, and if Steve is there promise me you won't hassle him. Deal?"

Billy gave a playfully glare at her before, reaching and fixing her scarf on her head himself.

"Fine..."

Laughing, July snuggled up close to him, playing with his necklace.

The next day...

Billy ended up meeting Tommy, Patrick, Nick, Bradley, and Steve for a quick game. The gym was open for cheerleading practice, but the guys had it to themselves for an hour before hand. Billy had started his morning off rough. Neil woke him up screaming since the hot water heater had blown out and he needed his help. Billy and him worked on it, and ended up getting the pilot lit, but the second they got up Neil roughly whacked the back of Billy's head.

"Surprised you knew what you were doing? Thought the only things you know how to do is hang out with your sick girlfriend, moon over yourself in the mirror, and listen to trash music."

Billy didn't say a word, he knew better. After changing, he glanced at July's house, mentally nothing to himself that in just a few hours he would be with her, and watching the look in her eyes when she unwrapped her gift would be worth all the bullshit he had been putting up with. He drove to the gym, and met the guys. Steve and him exchanged a look for a second, and Billy knew if he tried to act like a smart ass, he would lay him out. Peeling his shirt off, him, Patrick, and Nick were skins. They started off, and Billy dribbled the ball with ease. He grabbed three shots from Steve, and made two slam dunks. He started feeling pretty good about himself, when Bradley called a timeout while he ran to the bathroom.

Billy went to the bleachers, to grab a drink from his water bottle. Steve was sitting on the bleachers, by his gym bag, drinking some Gatorade. Billy glared at him, sweating lightly, as he pushed his hair back. Just then, Tommy clapped against his shoulder.

"Hey man, how's July doing?"

Billy caught Steve looking over. Billy shrugged as he took another gulp of his water.

"She's okay, still doing chemo. I'm seeing her tonight."

"Yeah, my mom saw her mom last week at the market. I keep meaning to swing by, it's just been crazy."

"I'll tell her you said hi."

Just then Patrick walked over grinning.

"What? Are we talking about Hargrove's girlfriend? I saw her the other day. Jesus man...do you like dudes or what? I saw her haircut. Jesus!"

Billy saw Steve's expression drop as suddenly a white hot blinding rage overtook him. Turning, his nostrils flared as he glared at Patrick grinning.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

Patrick shrugged.

"Come on man, you gotta admit...she looks rough now. Good thing she's got some nice tits on her huh?"

Billy didn't hold back. He lunged at Patrick, fists swinging, as he decked Patrick square in the jaw. Tommy, and Steve jumped up to hold him back as he screamed and continued to hit Patrick over and over and over again...

12. Just giving up

"You mother fucker!"

Billy screamed, slamming his fist down on Patrick's bloody face door the eighth or ninth time. In an instant, he felt several arms wrap around him, and pull him off. Patrick was screaming, raising his fist and catching Billy's lip for a fraction of a second, screaming at the top of his lungs, his nose, and eyes bruised, swollen, and bloody as he shouted that he was insane, and struggled beneath Billy's body who fought to climb back onto of him. Bradley, Tommy, and Steve pulled Billy off Patrick, as he continued to struggle and fight against them, completely losing it as he shouted down to Patrick that he was going to fucking kill him. Tommy and Steve double teamed as they pulled Billy away, telling him to calm down, that if he kept yelling somebody might get someone and they would all be in trouble. His chest heaving, Billy felt his pulse race, as his temples pounded as he stared, nostrils flaring, fists curled up tight on each side of him. Bradley helped Patrick stand up on two shaken feet. Both of his eyes were nearly swollen shut, and his nose was gushing blood.

"Jesus Christ man! What's the matter with you?!"

Billy went to lunge at him again but Steve and Tommy held onto him tight, trying to tell him to calm down. Tasting blood, Billy didn't care if anyone came, he didn't care if Patrick told of him, or if he got in trouble. Instead all he wanted to do was punch that smug look off that prick's face for saying what he did about July. He knew Patrick always struck out with girls and was probably just jealous that July wouldn't give an asshole like him the time of day. Feeling outraged, he looked completely insane as his eyes widened, as he pointed at him as blood dribbled down his lip.

"You say one more Goddamn word about my girlfriend and I'll fucking kill you."

He spit in his direction, tiny flecks of blood splattered across the highly polished gym floor, before he ripped away from Steve and Tommy's grips, and walked to the bleachers. Grabbing his bag, he headed to the locker room, hitting the door so hard for a fraction of a

second he was afraid it might actually shatter. Storming into the locker room, he knew he needed to calm himself down before he actually killed that little bastard and end up getting arrested. Instead he tried to think of July. They had a special night planned, and he would be damned if Patrick was the cause of that not happening. Walking over to the lockers, he threw his gym bag down, unzipped it, and took out his jeans. Pulling his gym shorts off, he tossed them back into the bag, before pulling his jeans on, and zipping them up. Just then Steve walked in, eyes dropped down. Billy looked over, and gave a humorless laugh as he grabbed for his T-shirt inside his bag.

"So, that little prick gonna live or do we need to call an ambulance?"

Steve smirked.

"He's bitching and moaning, Bradley and Tommy are taking him to get some ice. How's your lip man?"

Billy, who had completely forgot about it, reached and touched his split bottom lip, which stung, but had stopped bleeding. Sniffing, he shot Steve a look.

"I'll be fine."

"You want some ice man?"

Billy put on his T-shirt, still sweaty from nearly killing Patrick, and grabbed his jacket. Shrugging it on, he turned as he zipped his bag up and looked at Steve.

"I'll be fine King Steve..."

He went to push past him, on his way out when Steve touched his arm, causing him to pause and look. Steve's eyes looked concerned.

"Hey, how is July. I keep meaning to go see her..."

"She's fine."

Billy snapped, not quite able to control the mixed feelings he felt about Steve. One side of him figured he wasn't all that bad. That Steve might act like an idiot, and have the hair to match, but he was

still a good person. Somebody he might actually want as a friend... Then the other part of him reminded him that Steve was just a no good loser who thought he ruled the world simply because he was popular and had rich parents. He couldn't quite explain it, but he hated Steve for being July's first. As amazing as the night they shared together was, he still felt cheated since he wasn't the one responsible for being the first to touch July, and feel what it was like to be inside her body. Trying too control his temper, he shot Steve a look.

"She's fine, and doesn't need any pity..."

Steve stepped back.

"Hey man I..."

Billy shook his head, deciding that attacking Steve would be a low move. It was Patrick who deserved to be treated like shit. Not Steve. Staring at him, he shurged and playfully punched Steve's arm.

"I'll let her know you said hi."

He smirked at Steve, who returned the same expression.

"I'll see you around man."

Steve nodded.

"Sounds good."

With that Billy walked out, leaving Steve alone to look around and sigh.

Later...

July shook her head sitting on the edge of her bed, pressing a few ice cubes wrapped up in a facecloth against Billy's swollen cut lip. Billy hissed a little before July made a face, pressing it against his lip again.

"Don't be such a baby, you're fine."

Billy smirked, taking hold of the wrapped up ice and lowering it.

Looking at her, he smiled. He had a pretty bad headache since the second he came home following the fight Neil had been home and saw his split bloody lip and instantly started on him.

"Looks like some things don't change. Should I wait to see if the cops show up?" Billy sighed, his head was pounding and this was truly the last thing he needed.

"Just some jerk at school, it's fine."

He went to walk past Neil to get to his bedroom when Neil's hand shot out like a snake and grabbed his wrist, squeezing it tightly. Billy froze, forced to look at him. Glaring. Neil stepped closer, cocking his head as he got so close Billy could feel his hot breath against his skin.

"Think you're a tough guy huh?"

Billy dropped his eyes. He kept mentally telling himself he had a special night planned with July, and getting the shit kicked out of him because Neil was in a nasty mood would certainly spoil things. Neil reached down, squeezing Billy's jaw, his fingers digging deeply into his skin as he forced him to look up at him. Stepping close, Neil glared at him.

"Why did you get into a fight? Be honest with me boy."

Billy swallowed hard and stared at him, trying not to show any fear. His father's fingers dug deeper into his skin.

"Some guy was saying stuff about July...he was just shooting his mouth off."

"Well, since it's your choice to date a girl that's half in the grave, I would grow to get used to it."

Billy's hands itched to swing at his father. Instead he held them at his sides, curling them into tight fists. Neil let go of his jaw, and shook his head.

"Billy, you're seventeen...instead of dating healthy regular girls, you're basically just waiting around waiting for this chick to drop dead. Susan said her mom said she's stopping the chemo. The docs

are giving her a few more months tops. Do yourself a favor Billy, cut loose now, save yourself some heartache."

Billy glared before Neil grinned.

"What? Don't like we talking about your sick girlfriend that way? Gonna take a swing at me? Let's face facts. You're a fuck up Billy. You went from banging ladies old enough to be your fucking mother and knocking them up, to screwing girls that are practically a corpse."

Billy glared, and spoke through gritted teeth.

"July isn't dying..."

Neil made a face.

"Think again. Now you wanna go nurse her back to health tonight fine, but your ass better be here tomorrow. We're spending the day together like one big happy fucking family, and you better be nice to Max or it's your ass."

Billy glared.

"Fine."

Neil's face crumpled as he wound his hand back, and smacked the back of Billy's head as hard as he could. It shot white hot lighting pain into him. Stunned by it, Billy stared at his father, as Neil stepped closer.

"What's that?"

"Yes..."

"Yes what?"

"Yes...sir."

Neil grinned, and gave him a playful shake on his shoulder.

"Good boy."

Turning, Neil walked away leaving Billy standing in the living room,

his eyes filling with tears, and the back of his head aching. Just then, he heard a noise, and he sniffled, glancing over and saw Max in her bedroom. She was standing in the doorway and had witnessed all of it. Like always, she seemed more embarrassed than anything else. Billy dropped his eyes, before Max cleared her throat.

"Um...Billy?"

Billy sighed deeply, before looking back up, hoping she wouldn't see the tears.

"What shitbird?"

Max sadly smirked before she motioned for him to her bedroom.

"Come here for a sec..."

She turned, walking inside her room. Billy felt a mixture of being annoyed, as well as embarrassed. Max and Susan had witnessed plenty of times that Neil had hit him in front of them, as always they looked the other way as it continued to go on and on. Following her, head slightly lowered, he walked in, taking a quick glance around. The bedroom looked almost exactly the same as her room back in California. That stupid lampshade that Susan had made out of seashells sat beside her bed. In fact she had collected seashells as a hobby before the move. There were vases and jars of them everywhere. Looking at them reminded Billy of California, and it depressed him. Max was by her shelves, and taking something down. She looked over her shoulder.

"Shut the door." Billy made a face, rolling his eyes before he shut it, and leaned against the door, arms crossed.

His head was throbbing from where Neil had hit him, and his lip was starting to sting again. July told him to come by after dinner. Billy planned on skipping dinner to avoid Neil. Instead he just wanted to take a cold shower, and hang out in his room for a few hours listening to his music. Max turned, holding a shoebox. Her green eyes were filled with concern.

"You okay?" Billy was surprised she even cared to ask. He shrugged.

"I'm fine, used to it."

Max sighed, before sitting on the edge of her bed.

"I figured you were headed over to see July, so I wanted to give you these..."

There were three wrapped packages, wrapped in blue tissue paper and string. Billy made a face.

"What are those?"

"Your Christmas presents. July sorta helped me with two of them. The one of the bottom is for her, the other two are for you. Figured I would just give them to you now in case Neil is being a jerk tomorrow."

Billy was tempted to snap at her, saying he didn't want her shitty gifts, but decided it wouldn't help things. He knew snapping at her would just make him just as bad as Neil. Sighing, he stepped forward and Max smiled, scooting to the side, making room for him. Billy sat, before she handed him the smaller of the three packages. Billy turned it over in his hand, before he tore into it, and brought out what it was. In his hands were a metal Camaro keychain. He smirked, holding it up. Max looked nervous, before Billy let a half smile escape. Max chewed on her bottom lip.

"I sent away for it from one of your car magazines."

Billy smirked.

"It's awesome. Thanks."

Max motioned to the other two packages.

"These two are the same. I went to July's last week and her mom helped me out...when you see her tonight you can give her hers."

Billy raised an eyebrow, setting his keychain and torn up tissue paper between the two of them, before he unwrapped the next package. Instantly he stopped and he felt a strange fluttering deep in his chest. It was a frame, made with bottle caps and seashells, all hot glued

together to actually made a pretty cool looking picture frame. Sitting in the homemade frame was a picture taken by July's mother this past Thanksgiving. July and Billy had rolled their eyes when she forced them to sit together on the sofa and pose as she used her camera to snap a photo of them. July sat on Billy's lap, as he wrapped his arm around her, and last second he leaned in and kissed July's cheek, causing for to break free from this heavy medication haze she was under, causing her to squeal and laugh. It was at that exact moment that July's mother snapped the photo. It was the only photo of them actually together. Billy stared down at it for a long time in silence. Max stared at him.

"I made a matching one for July. You like them?"

Billy looked up, actually feeling deeply touched. He smiled, hating himself for his eyes for starting to water again. The last thing he wanted was to start crying in front of Max. Looking at her, he nodded.

"I love them shitbird."

Max smiled, relieved, before Billy hooked an arm around her, and pulled her close to him. He ruffled her hair, causing her to giggle. Pulling apart, he smiled, tempted to kiss her forehead, but decided not to. Instead he smiled.

"Thanks, I know she'll love them."

He got up, collecting his gifts, before he looked at Max and smiled.

"Thanks...these are the best gifts I've ever gotten."

Max seemed to light up at this, as Billy smiled and left the bedroom. Placing the packages down on his bed, he picked out some clothes for tonight, and made a mental note and score a bottle of wine from the mini-mart downtown. He wanted tonight to be perfect, but something new hung over him like a dark cloud. Headed to the bathroom to shower, he kept wondering how he was going to bring it up to July?

Now he sat in July's bedroom, having just come over less than an hour ago. It had started to start snowing outside, and he wanted to

talk to her. July scolded him for getting into a fight over her. She was used to jerks saying stuff, and never let it bother her. He had given her the picture frame from Max as soon as he came over and she gushed over it, placing it on her nightstand. He brought a bottle of wine, and had her Christmas gift waiting in it's wrapped package across the room. He couldn't wait to see her face once she opened it. Tonight she looked beautiful in tights and a long black sweater. She had another scarf on, and it actually looked really good on her. He had planned on them wrapping their gifts together, and maybe moving things to the shower. He had a few ideas on how they could spend the evening, and was very much looking forward to a few mindless carefree hours of good sex with his girlfriend.

He knew she was certainly up to it since she greeted him when he came to the door with a very wet, and open mouthed kiss, clinging over him as she stood on her tiptoes. He held the icepack and sighed.

"My dad...said your mom was talking to Susan."

July's face fell as Billy stared at her, hating that he was actually getting angry with her.

"When were you gonna tell me you were stopping chemo?"

July sat there in silence for a few seconds, eyes dropping and staring at her lap, before she looked up, tears starting to form in her big almond shaped eyes.

"The doctors said I'm not getting any better. At this rate, it might give me a few extra weeks tops..."

"So you're just GIVING UP?!"

He shouted, standing up looking completely outraged. Throwing the icepack across the room, he began to pace, running his hands through his hair, frantic, and the angriest he ever felt in his life.

"Billy..."

July tried to begin, but Billy turned and glared at her, his eyes big as he pointed his finger at her.

"SO WHAT? YOU LOSE YOUR HAIR AND NOW YOUR JUST GONNA CURL UP AND DIE? WHAT ABOUT ME JULY? EVER THINK OF YOUR PARENTS? WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN TO US AFTER ALL THIS TALK OF WANTING TO FIGHT AND BEAT THIS THING?!"

July's eyes filled with tears as she continued sitting on the edge of her bed. She shook her head.

"It's not that simple Billy. It's not just my hair, I really don't care about that. It's everything else. You have no idea how painful it's been for me. I'm sick all the time, puking so hard sometimes I have accidents or even taste blood. I'm weak, and everything aches. I'm sick of being pumped full of chemicals and spending what little time I have left in a hospital hooked up to wires and tubes. That's no way to live..."

Billy continued pacing.

"But they can HELP YOU! Why are you being so stupid?!"

July sighed.

"I'm sick Billy. You can buy me scarfs and wigs, you can defend my honor by getting into fights, you can pretend that everything is perfectly fine...but the truth is I'm dying. I'm dying Billy and I don't have much time left. I want to spend whatever time I have left actually feeling something instead of being stoned out on pills, and wasting away in some hospital. I'm dying Billy, and your the reason I'm actually feeling something for the first time since I got sick. I'm not giving up...I'm just so tired...I don't want the little time I have left being miserable."

Billy stopped pacing, chest heaving eyes full of angry tears. He shook his head.

"I won't fucking allow it. I'll drag you by the fucking hair if I need to and I'll bring you to the hospital...I'm not giving up on you that easy July. I'm not gonna sit back and watch you die."

July stared calmly up at him.

"I'm dying Billy...and nothing can change that."

Billy stared, before his lip quivered. He fought it, hating this. Turning around, he swore, shaking his head before he felt his thin arms slip around his waist. He wanted to push her off, tell her he didn't want to even look at her. Instead, he let everything out. Bowing his head, he broke down completely, sobbing as July held him, nuzzling his back with the side of her face as she held him tight, letting him cry over the fact that this was the end of the road. There was no more fighting left. July was dying, and nothing was going to change that, no matter how hard he tried. Feeling his entire chest heave, he cried even harder, as July squeezed him tight, not letting go.

Outside it continued to snow.

13. A nightmare becoming a reality

An hour later July finally got Billy to calm down. He cried until the sobs turned into nothing more than moans, and finally hiccups. He realized he hadn't cried that hard, or in front of somebody since his mother left, and the news of her death was told to him by a stone faced Neil. Finally he calmed himself down enough, that he allowed July to bring him back to bed, where the two sat, leaning against each other. Once Billy truly felt he had cried himself completely out, his head still pounding, he gently touched his swollen lip, before a small dry humorless laugh escaped. July raised her head and looked at him.

"What is it?"

Billy smirked, even though it hurt to do so.

"Just thinking about poor old Patrick. Wondering how his face is healing up."

July found that hysterical, and began cracking up. Before long, Billy, who watched her with a settle amused expression on his face slowly joined in. By the end both were cracking up, leaning against each other. Once the laughter settled down, July took a deep breath and smiled, before reaching up and brushing back Billy's bangs.

"Why don't we head downstairs and unwrap our gifts, then head back up here."

Billy stared into her eyes, serious.

"Are...you up to it?"

July smiled, cupping the side of his stubble covered cheek with her smooth cool feeling hands.

"More than you'll ever know. Come on..."

Standing, she offered her hand, and together the two headed downstairs.

Later...

Christmas Eve had been a fine one. Both July and Billy sat on the very same sofa July was sitting on a few months ago when Billy first laid eyes on her. They had the Christmas tree casting a gentle warm glow in the room as both sat beside each other, anxiously awaited each other's reaction once they opened their gifts. July had given Billy custom leather cowboy boots shipped from Arizona where one of her uncles lived. They were dark leather, with red stitch, and truly blew Billy away as he held them up, admiring the craftsmen ship. His pair of boots weren't real leather, and had been the same ones he had since the 8th grade. They were scuffed, broken, and nearly falling apart. July smiled sheepishly, and cocked her head to him.

"You like them?"

Billy laughed as he kicked off his own boots, and pulled up the new ones. They fit perfectly. Standing, he rocked back on his heels, before he walked the length of the living room, and stared down at them.

"These are amazing baby, honestly."

July's eyes lit up smiling, before Billy walked back, plopping himself down beside her. Smiling, he bent his head, kissing her cheek, and rubbing her thigh.

"I love them, thank you."

July smiled, before Billy reached behind him, and handed her the small slim package he had been hiding at the bottom of his closet. He had gone into his savings for this, and couldn't wait until he gave it to her. Unable to believe how nervous he was, he sat back as he watched her open the box, and pluck the tissue paper sat on top of it. Instantly, he saw her eyes widen as her mouth opened up in complete awe.

"Oh...my...God..."

Slowly, she reached down, and picked up the two gold thick rope hoop earrings he had bought for her. She held them, feeling the weight against her fingers, as she gazed at them in complete wonder.

Instantly, her big eyes lifted, filled with tears.

"Billy..."

Billy grinned, he couldn't believe the stupid nervous smile on his face as he laughed.

"You like it?"

July took a deep breath, looking extremely overwhelmed.

"Billy, it's so...beautiful, but you shouldn't have...it's too much..."

Billy smiled, taking the earrings from her hands. He leaned over, undoing the fasten, before carefully placing it into her earlobe. Smiling, he did the other one, before pulling back. He saw she was crying, and laughed shaking his head, wiping one of her tears with her thumb.

"Shhhhhh...don't cry, go look at yourself. You look beautiful."

July sniffled, before roughly wiping her eyes, before getting up and hurrying to the mirror that hung in the hallway. Fixing her scarf, she stared at them, gently turning the loops with her fingers, smiling. Billy got up, before walking behind her and gently slipping his arms around her waist, giving her a gentle squeeze.

"You like them?"

He nuzzled her neck, kissing her cheek. She giggled.

"Love them, you're too much..."

Billy looked up at the two of them in the reflection of the mirror, his arms around her, pressing her up against his body. He stared at her, and pushed away any feeling of overwhelming anger or sadness disappeared. Instead, he pulled her by the waist, picking her up slightly towards the stairs. July laughed as he carried her, licking, and kissing her neck.

Later...

Billy stood in the shower, hair soaking wet, and eyes closed. He had his hands above his head, one gripping the other wrist. The warm water continued to cascade down his muscular body, as he chewed on his lip, deeply moaning. July knelt in the shower, taking his penis in her mouth. Her scarf off, and any self-conscious thoughts completely gone. As they undressed, July paused to remove her scarf, before Billy smiled and slid it off her head for her. She looked up with slightly embarrassed eyes, before Billy smiled, sliding the pad of his thumb against her lips and smiled. Smiling, she started to unbutton his shirt. For the past twenty minutes they were fooling around hot and heavy beneath the shower. Billy took deep breaths, before he felt himself coming close. Trying to hold off, he felt the deep tingling building happening, as he let his hands go, and grasped down, gripping her shoulders.

Bucking his hips towards her, he cried out as he felt the warmth of her mouth grow tighter, before his penis twitched, and he climaxed hard. Seconds later, July slowly rose, beads of water clinging to her closely shaved head. The two stared at each other, before Billy smiled, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her close. Bringing her beneath the pouring shower head, both laughed as the water continued to come down on them.

Later...

Billy laid on top of July, steadily thrusting into her, causing her headboard to slowly creak. July stared up at him, holding onto his shoulder blades as he felt himself coming closer. He smashed his lips against hers, moaning through the kiss, before he knew he was going to finish. Determined to hold off, he reached above her, gripping the headboard, flexing his arms, before he face became flushed, before the building couldn't hold off any longer, and he snapped his eyes shut, climaxing. Feeling his head pound as he emptied out, he collapsed against her, heaving to catch his breath, before he lifted his head. His damp hair hanging down around him, before he pressed his forehead against hers. Both laughed lightly, before, July reached and rubbed his back.

"That was really good."

"I didn't hurt you did I?"

July shook her head, before reaching up and kissing him.

"Not at all, that was amazing."

Billy grinned, kissing her again, before carefully pulling out of her, and laying beside her. Hiking himself up on one elbow, he smiled, staring down at her. July smiled back, before turning over slightly, tracing her finger against his chest.

"Merry Christmas Billy..."

Billy leaned over, kissing her forehead.

"Merry Christmas baby..."

They laid in each other's arms, before July scooted closer, nuzzling her head against him.

"Tell me about California..."

Billy smiled, using his other arm to gently rub her side. He smiled, thinking of the sunny skies, the beaches, and the foaming crashing waves.

"We'll go there after graduation. I should have enough saved up. We'll be happy. I'll teach you how to surf, and every sunset we'll spend on the beach..."

July sadly smiled, gently playing with his St. Christopher metal.

"Sounds like Heaven..."

Billy smirked, still rubbing her side as he stared off into space.

"It is..."

The next morning...

Billy sat on the sofa, in sweats and a T-shirt as Neil and Susan were in the kitchen trying out the new coffee machine Neil had gotten for her. It was Christmas morning, and at least five inches of snow had come down over night. Billy had left July's late, she changed and

walked him to the door. He carried his new boots, wearing his old ones not wanting the salt on the road to dirty them up. Before leaving, July stood on her tip toes deeply kissing him, and thanking him again for the earrings. He promised he would call her tomorrow, and smiled before winking at her and leaving. July shut the door smiling, when suddenly another violent pain went through her. Snapping her eyes shut, she hissed before carefully sitting down on the sofa. Her head pounding, she gently rubbed her temples, before she felt the slick copper taste fill her throat as another bad nosebleed came, gushing down without any warning. Moaning, she grabbed the tissue box that sat on the coffee table, and tilted her head back. Blood soaked through the tissues as she whimpered, wishing Billy hadn't of left.

This morning Billy sat back amused watching Max unwrap her presents, before he scooted the package July had helped wrap for him earlier that week.

Max held it in her hands before smiling, and unwrapping it as quick as she could, ripping the paper into strips. Right away her big green eyes lit up in amazement as she held up the mini radio he had bought for her.

"Oh my God Billy! I love it!"

Without any warning she wrapped her arms as tight as she could against him. Billy sat back, his body stiff, but a small amused smile spreading across his face.

That night...

Christmas had been pretty boring. Susan made dinner, and Billy tried not to cause any trouble by keeping his mouth shut. Susan and Neil went to a neighbor's house for drinks around ten, and Billy spent most of the evening shoveling the side driveway out, finding himself looking across at July's house. He missed her. When he came back in, he took a hot shower, and tossed out his old boots. He figured tomorrow he would ask July if she wanted to go for a drive or take in a movie. When he walked by Max's room he saw her playing with all of her new presents, her brand new radio playing some pop station on her nightstand. He smirked, before walking into his room.

Touching his tender lip, he figured he didn't have anything better to do besides get some sleep. Laying in just sweatpants on his bed, he relaxed before closing his eyes and falling asleep.

An hour later he shot up like a bullet sweating. He had just had the worst nightmare of his life. He had gone across the street to visit July, only to be stopped by July's parents. They informed him that July had just died. Even in his dream, Billy blinked in disbelief, before he pushed past them, and much to his horror saw July's pale lifeless corpse laying on the living room floor. The only strange this was, in his dream she had her hair back. He ran to her, falling to his knees before trying to shake her awake. He tried CPR, but every-time he went to breath for her she seemed to feel more and more frail, like tissue paper. By the third time he tried to lace his hands and pump up and down on her chest, he was horrified to find her body had turned into ash, which crumpled in his arms.

That's when he woke up, eyes wide and frantic, sweat rolling off him as he looked around his room. Heart hammering, he took a second, before it hit him that it had just been a dream. Swinging his legs off his bed, he searched for his new boots, and pulled them on, before grabbing his leather jacket. Afraid Susan and Neil might be home, he opened his window, and felt the burst of freezing cold air from outside. Carefully he climbed out, hitting the light snow on the side yard, before he eyed July's house and took off running. In a matter of seconds, he crossed the icy street, before doing what he usually did, and climbed up to her window.

He rapped on the glass, shaking from both fear and the cold. He didn't care if he woke her parents up, he just needed to see her.

"July? July? For fuck sakes open up!"

The window opened, and July in his baggy Van Halen T-shirt stood, her face puffy from sleep as she stared at him.

"Billy?"

Billy didn't want, instead he reached through the window, wrapping his arms around her, nearly causing the two of them to topple over as he climbed in through the window. July stood back, her eyes big and

afraid.

"What's the matter? You're shaking..."

Billy scanned her, before he gathered her up in his arms and held her as tight as he could.

"I...had a dream...you...were dead...it was fucking horrible..."

July sighed, hearing his voice shake, before she brought him over to her bed. Allowing him to lay his head in her lap, she gently petted his hair, trying her hardest to sooth him and calm him down.

"Shhhhhh, it's okay. It was just a dream...I'm okay...I promise."

Billy laid there, still shaking as July continued to pet his hair. After a while, she got him to calm down enough to tell her all about the dream. That night Billy stayed over at July's, laying awake, holding her tightly in his arms.

Later that week...

Billy as promised took July out for a ride. He noticed she had a little trouble walking, and had offered his arm to walk her around the car due to the ice. They spent most of the morning driving around the backroads. Billy kept reaching over, rubbing her thin shoulder and smiling at her, but he sensed something was different. She hadn't talked much, but wore her gold earrings and a purple scarf. She smiled at him, and kissed his hand, but he could feel she was having a rough time. Wanting to cheer her up, he asked if she wanted to take a drive up to the new shopping mall that was supposed to open up early this spring. They drove by the large construction site, and Billy parked. They saw the large billboard that said in large letters...

STAR COURT MALL! COMING SOON!

July smiled, laying her head against Billy's shoulder, both now knowing that a little over six month from then...Billy would die there.

A few weeks later... It was a cold January morning, but Billy wanted to take July out again. They had spent most of the night before talking on the phone since she wasn't really up to having company.

He knew she was having some rough days, and wanted to give her plenty of space, but he missed her like crazy. The last time he saw her had been Thursday after school. He came over to help fix Mrs. Criss' kitchen sink which had started to leak, and stayed for dinner. He mentally noted that July who seemed extremely thin barley touched her food. Afterwards, they went up to July's room to listen to music. He playfully danced with her, spinning her around before she got too dizzy and had to sit on the bed. They spend the remainder of the evening in each other's arms watching TV before he had to go home. Last night they spent nearly three hours on the phone before Neil screamed he had to get off. Rolling his eyes, he told July he would take her out tomorrow.

"Sounds good Billy."

"Okay, I'll see you in the morning firecracker. Love you."

"Love you too." Billy heard the click of the phone and then the dial tone, and couldn't quite explain the weird feeling he had in his stomach.

Instead he stayed up a little while longer listening to music, before getting to bed.

This morning he showered, and changed before heading across the street. Climbing the stairs, seeing his breath come out in tiny puffs, he twisted the doorbell and waited. The door opened and right away the sight of Mrs. Criss' tear filled eyes hit him like a brick. Billy stared before Mrs. Criss, who was holding a tissue, let a sob escape, before she shook her head. Billy noticed Mrs. Clarke, and Mrs. Bell, elderly neighbors sitting in the living room, both with Mrs. Criss' address book, making calls. Both looked as if they were crying as well. Billy felt all the color drain from his face, as his heart hammered in his chest. He took a step back, wanting to just turn around and go home. If he ignored it, everything would be okay...

"Oh Billy...I'm so sorry honey. July passed away in her sleep last night. She died around two this morning..."

Billy stared forward at Mrs. Criss' tear filled eyes, feeling his entire world come crashing down around him.

14. A plan to escape

"Billy? Billy? Oh God Billy I'm so sorry..."

Billy experienced his first encounter with shock. It hit him like an ice cold bucket of water. He stood frozen on the front porch he had visited countless times in the last three months. Suddenly the freezing cold outside felt boiling. Sweat broke out all over him, and for an instant he remembered years ago when Neil came to him to inform him that his mother was dead. The second he began to cry, an open palm slapped across his face hard enough to knock his entire head back. The same horrible empty pit feeling dropped in his stomach, as the entire world somehow seemed to freeze. He stood for a second, wearing his leather jacket, a white T-shirt, jeans, and the cowboy boots July had given to him. He remembered last night, how tired July sounded when she said goodbye to him. That a very settle funny feeling that overcame him when he heard the last words she would ever say to him...

"Love you too."

Before he heard the click of her hanging up and the dial tone. he knew he should have snuck out and see if she was okay? He knew he shouldn't have fallen asleep. He knew this week she hadn't seemed "right", she was slower, paler, weaker. He felt it even when he squeezed her hand, or held her close. He noticed purplish brown circles under her eyes, or how pale her lips seemed. Her eyes were becoming bloodshot, and had developed something she called "blood rings" which happened because of her blood pressure. They were dark red circles around the color of her eyes. He remembered playing music up in her bedroom, and how he twirled her slowly around, laughing, telling her maybe he would go to the stupid prom this spring. He would have the hottest girl there. July smiled, staring up at him, before resting her palms against his chest as he held her by the waist and slowly swayed her back and forth to the music.

"I thought you said you weren't going?"

Billy shrugged as he continued to dance with her.

"Yeah, but that was before it hit me what an amazing dancer you are!"

He reached up tickling her, before he noticed she almost tripped, and he slowly guided her to the edge of the bed. He smiled, rubbing her back.

"You okay?" July nodded, before she brushed back his hair from his face and smiled.

"You would look very handsome in a tux."

Billy hooked his arm around her, bringing her in close kissing the top of her head, before mentally taking note how skinny she had gotten. He hated it. Still, she was perfectly fine. Standing on the front porch, he stared at Mrs. Criss' tear filled eyes, waiting any second for her to either laugh and say she was just kidding and have July pop out, or for him to wake up, shaking and sweating, but his girlfriend still alive across the street. Instead, he watched as Mrs. Criss tried to reach for his arm. She was still crying and saying something, but everything began to spin. No, July wasn't dead. She couldn't be. Life couldn't be that unfair...

He pushed back her, harder than he intended. The women who were helping Mrs. Criss in the living room gasped, as Mrs. Criss stumbled to the side. Billy suddenly was filled with rage. A white hot rage he couldn't explain. His face became flushed, as he screamed at the top of his lungs for July. The cords in his neck stood out as he shouted, running up the stairs as fast as he could.

"JULY! JULY! WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?"

He could faintly hear Mrs. Criss calling after him, but he ignored it. Instead he ran right to her bedroom and yanked open the door. He stood in the doorway and stared at her unmade bed. The cover had been thrown back, most likely either by Mrs. Criss or the paramedics who came in. His blueish green eyes frantically scanned the room. Her stupid plastic little sharks, her dresser, all of her scarfs hanging on a hook near her closet. He spotted the framed photo Max had made for them sitting on the nightstand. Both on Thanksgiving, happy...unaware that any of this was going to happen... He stared at

the bed, the same bed he had sex with her a total of six times. The same bed he spent countless comforting nights wrapped up in her arms, listening to her breathing...

The same bed she had died in.

"Billy!" He turned, his eyes filled with tears, as Mrs. Criss stood behind him, she was crying just as hard as him. Billy shook his head.

"Where is she? Please tell me where she is..."

"Billy, I'm so sorry..."

She went to go reach up and hold him, but he pushed her away, outraged that she was doing any of this.

"WHERE IS SHE?!"

He shouted right in her face, spit flying from his mouth. Instead of looking scared, Mrs. Criss walked forward, reaching forward, before gathering him in her arms. He wanted to scream at her, swear and push her off. Instead he felt his knees weaken, as his muscles turned to jelly as his face crumpled, and he broke down completely in her arms. Holding him tight, Mrs. Criss held him as tight as she could as he completely broke down in her arms.

Three days later...

July was still dead. They said it was a seizure in her sleep. Billy in the last three days had barely done anything besides sleep. He couldn't find the strength to go to school. Susan told Neil it was perfectly fine if she drove Max to school this week. Neil tried to argue, but Susan insisted. Each night she came to Billy's door, gently knocking with a plate of dinner. Each time, Billy simply said he wasn't hungry. He hadn't showered, and a good three day old worth of growth had grown on his mustache and beard. His muscles ached, and his head throbbed. All he wanted to do was close the blinds in his bedroom, turn over, and sleep. He had this stupid scarf of July's. The black one, which had been her favorite. She had come over earlier last week and had hung out in his room listening to his tapes. They had started making out, even though he could tell she was tired.

He had gently slipped the scarf off, and ran his hands back over her head. Somehow it was important not to make her think about her hair. Billy honestly didn't care, and wanted to make her feel good. Things started getting hot and heavy, and the scarf simply was forgotten as it slipped between his bed and the wall. Billy found it a few days later, smirking, and had mentioned to July he would bring it back over, but seemed to keep forgetting. He hadn't been able to let go of the scarf since he returned home following the news of July's death. Ignoring the heavy traffic of cars that were coming and going in front of the Criss'. Instead he simply laid holding onto the scarf, smelling the faint smell of lavender, and silently sobbing. He would cry in the darkness nonstop. His stomach and chest ached, his eyes bloodshot and raw. He moaned into his scarf, crying into it, only being able to escape from this constant aching pain that wouldn't go away. He could hear Neil talking with Susan in the hallway, complaining that he was being dramatic, that this was the cold hard reality of dating a girl with a stage three brain tumor. He told her sooner or later he was going to have to get up, pick up the pieces, and accept the fact she was dead and not coming back. He had school to go to, and Max to drive. Finally he heard Susan for once stick up for herself, telling him to give Billy a week. To just leave him alone, next Monday she agreed, he would have to go back to school. Until then, just leave him alone. Billy laid in the darkness of his bedroom, still clutching July's scarf, listening to Neil mutter a few swears, before walking away. Billy shut his eyes, silently thanking Susan.

The last thing he needed was Neil on his ass. He felt if his father did storm into his room, flicking on the lights, demanding that he get up he might completely black out and lose it. Closing his eyes, he felt fresh hot stringing tears roll down his face, wishing more than anything he could have July back. He promised God that he would trade his life for hers, that he would do anything to get her back. It wasn't supposed to end like this. She was supposed to get better, she was supposed to beat this, and they were going to graduate and leave this shit town together. He was going to take her to California, where everything was supposed to be better...

He closed his eyes, his chest heaving as he finally fell asleep by pure exhaustion. A little after nine, he heard his door open. Cracking his eyes open, for a brief second he thought all of this had been part of

some terrible nightmare. That he was going to wake up, and everything was going to be okay. He would race across the street, and July would be waiting for him...

Instead it was Max, she was holding a mug of tea.

She stared down at him with sad eyes.

"Get out..."

He whispered, not finding the strength to raise his voice. Instead, Max ignored him and came over, before placing the mug down on the nightstand.

"I made you some tea, you really outta eat something."

Billy turned over, putting his back to her.

"Get out Max."

He said in his deep voice. He faced the wall, just wanting to disappear. He felt Max sit down on the edge of his bed. He wanted so badly to turn around and scream at her. Instead he just continued staring blankly ahead, feeling miserable.

"Tomorrow is the funeral. Neil isn't letting us go. He said I shouldn't miss school, and mom and him can't miss work. Mom sent flowers and baked a few pies for the Criss'. I just...want to let you know...if you need anything...I'm here."

He felt her hand rest on his side. It wasn't weird, and he didn't slap it away. The past for forgotten, and at this exact moment Max and Susan were the only people besides the Criss' that knew how badly he was hurting. Staring blankly ahead at the wall, he took a second, before reaching backwards, and gently patting Max's hand.

"Thanks Max. I just wanna sleep."

"Okay, remember if you need anything, or want something to eat let me know okay?"

"Thanks Max."

He felt her tiny hand pat him one last time, before he listened to her walk out of the dark room, and close the door, leaving him in darkness. He continued staring ahead, before shutting his eyes and falling into a dreamless slumber. An hour later, he was woken by the shrill ring of his telephone that sat beside his bed next to the framed photo of July and him. He was thankful Neil had the TV up loud down the hall, and blindly reached and answered it, still foggy and still half asleep as he answered it, for a brief second thinking it would be July asking when he was coming over?" Instead he heard Mrs. Criss' voice.

"Billy?"

Billy took a second, before he sat half up, his hair a mess, and his face hot from crying in his sleep.

"Hello?"

"Hi honey, I'm sorry for calling so late, I hope I didn't wake you."

Billy looked around the darkness of the bedroom, feeling his throat hot and dry from the heavy sleep, and the constant crying, he reached and grabbed the mug that Max had left, and took a quick sip of the cold tea. He rubbed his eyes before shaking his head.

"No, I was just...laying down."

"I'm sorry for calling honey, but...it's been so crazy around here. I wanted to let you know the funeral is tomorrow at St. Michael's..."

Billy was ready to tell her he couldn't stand going, seeing all those stranger's faces, members of July's family. He couldn't handle the whole funeral thing, standing in a suit, sitting back trying to control himself from breaking down as some priest went on and on about everlasting life. Instead, almost as if July's mom had heard his inner thoughts, she spoke again.

"I know you're hurting Billy, we all are. Me and July's father, we knew she didn't have much time left, but we didn't think it would be this soon. I figured you wouldn't be up to facing everyone, so I wanted to see if you wanted come by the funeral home around eight,

that's almost two hours before everything starts. You can say goodbye if you want. No judgement if you can't, I understand..."

Billy closed his eyes for a second, before nodding.

"Yeah, I'll be there...what funeral home?"

"Everwood, down on Maple."

"Yeah, I know it."

"I'll let them know to let you in, take care Billy."

With that she hung up, yet again almost knowing he didn't have the strength to say on the phone. He listened to the dial tone, the same hollow dial tone he listened to the night July hung up and died just a few hours later. Staring at the phone, he swallowed hard, before hanging up. Standing, he felt the room spin for a second, before he walked barefoot across the room and opened the door. He saw a PBJ sandwich laying on a plate on the floor in front of his room. Bending down he picked it up, figuring it was Max. Turning, he put it on the small sofa in his room, covered on laundry, before headed to the bathroom, which was the only reason he had ventured out in the last three days. Going inside, he flicked on the lights, squinting before going to the toilet, lowering his sweats slightly, before he held himself and began to pee. Slowly, he turned and looked over at the sink. The same sink he had once shaved at with July sitting on the counter, swinging her legs watching him, before she finished the job herself. That seemed like a million years ago...

Once he finished, he shook, tucked himself away, pulled up his pants and flushed. Washing his hands, he stared at his reflection and couldn't believe how awful he looked. Knowing he didn't have the strength to shave and shower now, he figured he would save it for the morning once everyone was gone. Drying his hands, he ventured back to his room, grateful that nobody like his father stopped him on his way. All he wanted was to just crawl back into bed and forget about everything for a few hours. Shutting the door, he stood in his bedroom, before glancing down at the sandwich. He wasn't hungry, but knew if he really did intend on making it out tomorrow, he needed some strength. Picking up one side of the sandwich he took a

bite, not quite tasting it, before tossing it back down on the plate and returning back to his bed.

Taking another swing of the cold tea that sat on his nightstand, he stared for a moment at the framed photo of him and July. He felt his chest tightening again, before his eyes watered. Hating this, he laid back down, grabbing hold of July's scarf, and staring up at the ceiling.

At this exact moment...he wished he was dead.

The next morning...

Billy left the house early, grateful that his father, Susan, and Max were gone for the day. He didn't exactly have nice clothes to wear, so he figured a set of dark jeans, a button up shirt, and his leather jacket would just have to do. He shuffled to the bathroom, shaved, showered, and changed, feeling as if he was on autopilot. Once he had finished, he grabbed his keys, and left. Before climbing into his car, he glanced at the Criss' house, and July's bedroom window. Ignoring the sudden throbbing in his chest, he climbed into the car, started the engine, and drove. It was an icy cold morning, and he drove as if he was watching from above.

He smoked a total of three cigarettes on his way over, feeling his nerves on edge. He arrived at the funeral home, before parking and getting out. He squinted up at the white framed house with a large farmer's porch. Sighing, he walked across and climbed the stairs, before pressing the doorbell. After a few moments the white lace curtain that covered the window twitched, and revealed an old man in a suit.

"Mr. Hargrove?"

Billy felt a little out of place but nodded, suddenly wanting a cigarette very badly. He nodded.

"Yeah."

"Please come in, Mrs. Criss said you would be by."

Billy entered the lobby of the funeral home, tempted to put his hands

in his front pockets, and looked around. The lobby resembled a very nice living room of an old Victorian house. There were cherry wood tables, with vases filled with flowers, over stuffed antique chairs, and potted plants. The man led him to two large French doors. On an easel, written on a cream colored card it read...

July Amber Criss

Billy felt his throat tighten, before the man gave him a gentle pat on the back.

"If you need me I'll be in my office down the hall. Take your time son."

Billy nodded, unable to speak before he watched the man walk down the hallway. Turning, feeling his palms sweat, he took a deep breath, before turning the knobs of the door, and walking into the "viewing" room. He had been to a few funerals for a few of his father's friends and Susan's father back in California, but he hadn't been allowed to go to his own mother's. His father refused. Standing, he saw it was a well sized room. Organ music played softly in the background. There were at least twenty folding chairs in neat little rows, an aisle made, leading to the open casket at the front of the room. The coffin the Criss' chose was a cream color, with light blue silk lining.

There were tons of flowers on each side of the casket, so many that suddenly Billy knew why he felt his throat was tightening. The scent of flowers was overpowering. He stood for a second, staring ahead and saw her. His whole world stopped again. He sighed, knowing it was now or never before he did this. He shifted from one foot to the other, and sighed. Only her upper half showed since the top of the casket was open. She was in a white lace dress, and a beautiful matching scarf was placed on her head. Billy, feeling in a trance slowly walked towards the casket, unable to take his eyes off her. Finally he reached the casket and stared down. It was July, but it wasn't July. The body had heavy makeup on, mostly around the eyes. Her slender hands were folded, holding a single white rose. He stared down, and wondered how long it took the funeral worker to smother her with enough makeup to make it look as if she hadn't been suffering and dying these last few months. Standing there, Billy felt his feet rock back and forth for a second. He stared down at her

remembering the first say he laid eyes on her, walking into her living room, finding her sitting on the sofa trying to stop a nosebleed.

He remembered taking her to that stupid Halloween party, and seeing her in that black lace gown, very similar to the one she wore now besides the color. He remembered frantically kissing her in the bathroom, and how later that night she had playfully flashed him. He remembered the first night they had sex, and how out of all the girls and women he had slept with, he actually felt something besides pleasure when he had entered her. A thousand memories flooded over him in these brief short three months. Holding her in his arms, kissing her, and actually feeling safe...as if his future might have a small sense of hope. He reached down, and with a shaken hand, touched her cheek. It was cold. He closed his eyes and deeply sighed. "Hi firecracker..." He muttered, feeling hot tears squeeze out of his eyes and trail down his face.

He hated it. Feeling extremely overwhelmed, he gripped onto the casket and held back a moan, that sounded more like a trapped wheeze. He sniffled loudly, before opening his eyes, feeling teardrops cling to his eyelashes. He stared down at her, wanting her so badly to just open her eyes and stare up at him. This was the girl he was supposed to end up with.

This wasn't supposed to happen...

He lowered his head, holding onto the side of the casket before he allowed a loud sob to escape.

"I'm sorry..."

He muttered, before leaning down and kissing her cold lips. Bringing his head back, he stared at her, feeling more tears pour down, unable to stop them.

"Billy?" Billy turned, and saw Mrs. Criss standing there. She wore a simple black dress, and looked so much older than she actually was. Billy didn't try to hide the fact he was crying.

Instead, he stared at her before she slowly came to him, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tight. After what seemed like

forever, Billy finally felt himself calm down. He pulled back and sniffled.

"Where's your husband?"

"Airport, picking up family. It's been really crazy around here. July never wanted a big funeral, but I couldn't help it. She was my little girl...and even though I knew this was going to happen, I keep expecting to hear her upstairs, or see her pull up outside in your car."

Billy shut his eyes, never hurting so badly before in his life. Mrs. Criss wiped his hand with her fingers, just like her daughter had done not that long ago when she admitted she was tired of fighting. He hated that in the end it meant nothing.

That despite it all, a simple seizure had taken her away from him in the end.

"I wanted you to have these..."

She reached into her purse and dug out two things. One was the framed photo Max had made for them for Christmas. The other were July's earrings. She handed them over, and Billy shook his head.

"No..."

"Yes. Take them, she would have wanted you to have them, and she would have wanted you to pick up the pieces, and move on. You made her very happy Billy, I'll never forget that...but she knew she didn't have long. I want you to graduate, and get out of this town by any means...and never look back. Get away from that bastard of a father of yours, and go and be happy...for her...okay?"

Billy nodded, using his free hand to wipe his eyes.

"Okay."

"I wanted to let you know, we're putting the house on the market at the end of the month. My husband travels so much for work, I don't want to be alone now that she's gone. I'm moving down state with my sister, I'll write you and anytime you want you come and see me okay?"

Billy nodded, before Mrs. Criss sadly smiled, and cupped the side of his face.

"Take care darling."

Billy nodded, sniffing, knowing he wasn't able to turn around and look back at July's body any more. Instead, he sniffled again, holding the frame and earrings, and walked out, suddenly short of breath. Once he walked outside, letting the cold air hit him, he felt dizzy. He almost dropped his keys once he dug them out of the pocket of his jacket, and hurried to the door. Leaning against it, he closed his eyes, silently counting before he got his breathing under control. Before going in, he paused and stared down at the frame and earrings. Quickly, he walked around to the trunk, unlocked it, and opened it. Flinging the frame inside, it fell behind a spare tire he had pushed all the way back, before slamming it closed.

Walking back around, he opened the door, let himself in, and sat behind the wheel for a moment. Taking a second, he shook his head before staring the engine, and driving away. Hot new tears stung his eyes as he pressed down on the car and began to quickly speed down the farm roads.

Later...

Once Billy got home, it was still early and nobody was home. He entered his bedroom, before digging into the pocket of his jacket and took out the two earrings. Silently he walked to his nightstand, opened it, and lifted up his dirty magazines, and placed the earrings down. Shutting it, he stood for a second, before staring at the framed photo of him and July. Suddenly a rage went through him. He glared at it, chest heaving before he picked it up in his shaking hands. Holding it, he stared down, faintly seeing his reflection in the glass, looking at the two of them. Overcome with rage, he screamed, before throwing the frame into his closet and hearing it shatter.

Chest heaving, he raced over, bending down and picking it up. The glass was splintered. He picked it up, before tossing it into his wastepaper basket, and lifting his boot, and bringing it down again, and again, and again. He kept hearing the crunch of broken glass, before he stood back, head pounding, and eyes stinging from the

newest batch of tears. Ripping off his jacket, he threw it across the room, before sitting down hard on the edge of his bed. He stared blankly ahead, eyes filled with angry lonely tears before he promised himself, after this week he would get up next Monday, get dressed, drive Max to school, and if anybody...anybody whatsoever mentioned July he would completely lose it. He could ignore the looks of pity and whispers, but he was done playing the victim. He should have fought harder for July, and now she was dead. He continued staring ahead, promising himself he would graduate, and figure out a way to get back to California, after that he would never look back.

Five months later...

Heather knelt on all fours on the narrow bench of the locker room at the Hawkins' public pool. Her ponytail bobbed, bouncing up and down, as she tried her hardest not to lose her grip and fall off. She hated that he picked this place of all places after hours to fool around. Constantly she begged him to take her someplace, maybe a motel, or up to the quarry where the chance of anybody walking in would be lower. As always, he would roll those gorgeous eyes of his, and he would tell her to stop being paranoid. She knew getting involved with somebody like him wasn't a good idea. She was a year behind him, but from the moment he signed up to take the CPR and first aid courses with her when they were hiring for new lifeguards for the summer, she couldn't take her eyes off him. She knew he was a bit of a bad boy, and seriously had one of the best bodies she had ever seen. She knew he slept around, and she had heard a rumor he had taste for older women, God knew most of the housewives of Hawkins came to the pool for one reason and one reason only. For him. She was sure this was just her way to try and rebel, act a little wild since she came from a wealthy good family. She knew she was just one of the many foolish girls he slept with, keeping it to sex, and nothing more, but she couldn't help but feel special.

He wasn't sleeping with Zoe and Katie. No, he had picked her. She vaguely knew had a girlfriend who had died of cancer or something, but she didn't know the details. All she knew was he had been her first, and for the last month almost like clockwork every Friday night they would meet up here after locking up, and fool around. Tonight he had talked her into stripping down, and allowing him to take her

from behind doggystyle. She felt her perky breasts shake as he thrust into her at a frantic rhythm. It was uncomfortable, but earlier he had gone down on her making her see fireworks. She knew it was only a matter of time before she confirmed her worst fears. She had made a doctor's appointment for next week, and just prayed he wouldn't be a jerk. If she got daddy involved, God knew what would happen. He stood behind her, holding her by her hips as he slammed into her once, twice, and then loudly groaned before climaxing. She felt warmth, before he roughly pulled out of her, and patted her gently on the back. Heather felt her knees buckle slightly, before she carefully slid off the bench, and grabbed her shorts and bathing suit. Turning, she stared at him. He was fixing his red shorts, and turning towards the locker for his clothes.

"Billy?"

"I'll see you tomorrow Heather..."

He grabbed his clothes not bothering to change, leaving her alone. She sat there stunned, hating herself for allowing him yet again to use her like this. Sighing, she crossed her arms, before staring down at her flat stomach and suddenly fought back the urge to cry. She really had no idea what she was going to do? Meanwhile Billy walked outside, headed to his car, clothes and his gym bag in his arms. He had barley graduated, but had gotten this job for extra cash to carry him throughout the summer. He had no plans of going to college, or sticking around this shit town any longer than he had to. He had sold dope over the remainder of the school year, and had actually stocked up a pretty good pile of cash.

His real winnings would come in a few days. He knew Karen Wheeler visited the pool often, he actually had swim lessons with her youngest daughter tomorrow. As always she would lay back sunning herself like the rest of those horny bitches. He had to admit, she was hot, but he had other plans in store for her. He knew her husband was worth a good amount of money. What he would do was bait her, and get her to visit him at the motel 6 on the outside of town. He planned on laying on the same old fashion charm, fuck her brains out, while his video camera he bought this spring, hidden carefully in the closet recorded everything. Once he was finished with her, he would show her the tape and break it down for her plain and simple.

Give him twenty grand in cash, or he makes copies of the tape of not only her husband, but to all of her children's teachers, as well as everyone in town. He knew she would have to pay. Grinning at how clever he was, he climbed into his car, tossing his stuff on the passenger seat and started the engine. Music blasted from the radio as he grinned, and floored it out of the parking-lot, having no idea what was in store for him.

15. Summer 85

Billy turned to into the cemetery, before heading home. It was a nightly tradition, that he believed only he knew about. He turned the engine off, before reaching for his clothes, pulling them off the seat beside him, and opened up the driver's side door. Quickly he changed into his clothes, not worrying if anybody saw him. The cemetery oddly never was locked up, and since it sat beside one of the back farm roads, there wasn't any gate to stop him.

There was one other cemetery in Hawkins, and this one was much smaller. This one was mostly surrounded by trees, and a few gentle hills covered with mausoleums, and headstones. Billy had ben coming here ever since July was buried. Somehow it made him feel better, and he knew by the time this autumn he would be headed straight to California. If his plan with Mrs. Wheeler worked, he would have plenty of cash to head back. He planned on applying to surf shops and staring over. He wasn't really interested in what the future held, just as long as he was far away from here. Zipping up his jeans, he popped a cigarette in his mouth, before reaching into his gym bag. On his lunch break today he had cashed his check. It wasn't great money, but it was still steady income. Neil said he had until September and then he was going to start charging him rent. Billy knew that shouldn't be a problem since he planned on taking off right after Labor Day. Counting the cash, and took fifty out and stuffed the rest back in his gym bag. Walking, he puffed on his cigarette, before walking down between the graves, the boots July had given him gently crunching down on the soft lush green grass. Finally he reached July's grave.

July Amber Criss 1968 - 1985

Her headstone was a light grayish stone, her name and birth and death dates below. Nothing else. Billy stood before it, knowing six feet under beneath the soil laid his July, laying rotting in her coffin, hands folded around a dead dried up rose. The thought of her being worm bait constantly turned his stomach, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. He had struggled with nightmares of July in the weeks following her deaths. Some were downright heartbreaking.

There were ones where he was in her house, and find her looking like she did before right before she started to get really sick and lose her hair. She would always be sitting there waiting for him on her sofa, and her eyes would light up the second he saw her. As always he would race towards her, grabbing hold of her, squeezing her tight, covering the side of her face and neck with kisses, before begging her not to leave him. That he would do anything to have a second chance. That he wouldn't let her die. That he promised he would be a better boyfriend, and as always would snap awake, tears rolling down his face, finding himself alone, July still dead, and this constant ache throbbing in his chest. Other dreams would be him at the funeral home, convinced that July was still alive, and frantically trying to open her locked casket. Some where July would be sitting next to him, blood gushing from her nose and mouth, her eyes huge and scared, before she cried out between bubbling gasps for him to help her. There was one, and only one that was actually nice. It was of one night where the two of them just two weeks after they became "official" where he took her up to the quarry. He had draped his jacket over her, and snaked his arm around her and together they laid on the hood of his car staring up at the stars. It was that night that he told her everything about his mother, and how bad things actually got with Neil. She listened, not passing judgement. Instead she laid in his arms, gently rubbing his chest, allowing himself to show a side of him he never showed anybody. This dream always didn't last long, but as always he could faintly smell lavender, and whenever he woke up, he could have sworn he could still faintly smell her perfume. This year had been absolute Hell since July died, but he pushed forward, the only thing keeping him going was the fact he was getting out of this town as soon as possible. Steve had tried talking to him in the parking-lot just a week after he returned back to school, ignoring all of the looks and whispers behind his back. He didn't want anyone's pity. Steve had been going to his car as Billy waited for Max, smoking a cigarette. Steve walked over, books tucked underneath one of his arms, his heavy winter jacket on.

"Hey man..."

Billy shot him a look.

"Hey."

Steve stood before him, nervously shifting from one foot to the other.

"Listen, I just wanted to say..."

Billy held up his hand.

"Harrington. I'm gonna stop you there. It's okay, just drop it."

Steve raised an eyebrow confused.

"Huh?"

Billy rolled his eyes before pinching his cigarette down to the pavement.

"I don't need any pity. I don't wanna talk about it okay? Just drop it. We're not friends, so stop trying so hard."

Steve looked stunned.

"Hey man, listen...I'm just trying to be decent. I knew July, we were friends."

Instantly Billy raised his eyebrows looking off to the side.

"Oh yeah, I heard how close you guys were."

Steve's face dropped.

"Come on man, I'm just saying...it's okay to miss her. I miss her too. If you ever wanna talk or hang out I..."

Billy looked over Steve's shoulder, completely ignoring him before he spotted Max skating her way towards him from the middle school. He shot Steve a look, and dug his keys out, attached to the keychain Max had given him this past Christmas.

"Listen, just drop it. She's dead and that's it. You're not my friend, so stop pretending we're like brothers or something King Steve."

Billy circled around his car, leaving a stunned Steve standing there for a second, before he shook his head and turned back around going towards his own car. Max skated by him, seeing the look in his eyes

as he passed her. Picking up her board, she went into Billy's car, and shut the door. Billy was staring straight ahead. Max knew he didn't want to talk about it. The only reason they were getting along was because she never brought up July. Instead, she sat back before Billy started the engine, turned up the radio, and raced out of the parking-lot. The entire ride over, Max kept nervously eyeing Billy. She knew he was hurting, but refused to talk about July. She watched Neil constantly harp on him, as Billy pushed onward. He got up every day, drove her to school. They never spoke on the ride over there, he would simply park, and head towards the high school. He quit basketball, and like clockwork would pick her up. Most of the time they drove saying nothing. Sometimes he would ask if she wanted to swing by the mini-mart before heading home?

When she said sure, he would drive there, pull over, and hand her a five dollar bill. He would tell her to grab him a pack of smokes, since the man who owned the mini-mart knew Max was Billy's sister, and would sell cigarettes to her. She would go in, get him his smokes, grab two cans of soda for the two of them, and a candy bar for herself. This had only started since after July passed away. She would get back in the car, and he would let her keep the little bit of change that was left. They usually did this once or twice a week. At home Billy would do his chores, mow the lawn, trim the hedges out back, clean the gutters, before coming inside. He would work out for an hour or two, before showering, changing, take dinner with them saying nothing, before either going out for a few hours doing God knows what, or go into his bedroom and turn his music up.

Max had overheard her mother and Neil talk about him. Susan was worried he was depressed, Neil said he was just going to have to get over it and move on. Life was tough, and that was the end of it. Max so badly wanted to talk to him, but was scared he would flip off. She had heard about him getting into a few fights at school since July died, and was skating on thin ice to graduate. Still, she watched from afar as he distanced himself. He barley talked at home, and never smiled anymore. Billy felt that was for the best. If he got attached it would only end badly. Standing by July's grave, he took a long hard drive from his cigarette, before flicking it away.

Squatting down, he frowned, before running his fingertips against the

cool feel of the headstone. Everything would have been different if July was alive now. He closed his eyes, fighting away this horrible ache that had continued to haunt him since she died. Since that fateful chilly morning in January, he felt as if he was on autopilot. He felt as if he was sleepwalking. He went to his classes, did the bare minimum, just barely passed, and graduated somehow that still even stunned him. He remembered sitting for his yearbook photo, his hair longer than it had ever been. He sat, looking bored as the camera flashed, as he got up and walked away. He was invited to parties, went to a few, he smoked grass, got drunk, and even fooled around with some girls. He didn't feel guilty, and pushed away thoughts of July away, as he used these stupid nameless bitches for the only thing he felt they were good for. Usually he just went out driving. He missed his graduation, knowing his dad didn't give two shits about it. He was happy to say goodbye to Hawkins High, and now the blue house across the house was owned by a middle aged couple with two boys. Still, each night when he went to get into his car, he would look across and his eyes would linger on the dark bedroom window that had once belonged to his July. He felt if he left this place, maybe the nightmares, and empty numb feeling might lessen up. The more miles between him and Hawkins, the better.

Squatting, he closed his eyes for a second, before he reached down, pulling up the fake flowers he had laid down there this past March. The petals were faded, but he picked up a bunch of them at the discount store down town. He did this only every time he got paid every two weeks, and the fake flowers were a perfect cover. Buried beneath the soil, maybe less than a foot down was a small tin box. He pushed the tiny little pebbles, and soil off it, sweeping and dusting his hands across the box, before he spun the combos on the three tiny little metal wheels, before popping it open. He knew burying his money here wasn't the smartest idea, but he didn't trust his father at home. Instead twice a month, he would pull up the fake flowers, dig a little, and find the box. Here he would put part of his check inside, along with whatever extra he made by selling dope. He had a feeling once this deal with Mrs. Wheeler came through, he would only have to dig up the box a few more times before officially saying goodbye to July and leaving town once and for all. He counted the cash twice, before nodding, looking over his shoulder at the dark cemetery, making sure nobody was around, before shutting the box, locking it,

and burying it. He placed the flowers back, packing the soil down, before looking at his handy-work. Wiping his hands on his jeans, he stared down at the headstone for another second, before walking back to his car.

Later...

Billy pulled into the driveway just as Max was entering on her skateboard. He parked, killing the engine and lights, before getting out, his gym bag swung over his arm.

Max spotted him.

"Hey."

"Hey, where have you been?"

"Movies with Lucas and the guys."

"What you see?"

"Day Of The Dead. It was super gross."

Billy raised an eyebrow as he locked his car.

"They let you guys into that?"

Max smirked, knowing if she mentioned the gang's special connection with Steve might cause Billy to flip out. As far as she knew the two still couldn't stand each other ever since that night at Will's house. Smiling, she shrugged while holding her board.

"Will's brother bought us the tickets...so how was work? Pool packed?"

Billy shrugged as they began walking towards the door together.

"Same old shit, you really outta come down with your stupid friends. It's the only decent place to cool off in this shit hole."

Max eyed Billy as he opened the screen door for her.

"Yeah, maybe we'll go soon. Wanna watch a video?"

"I got work early tomorrow squirt. I'll take a raincheck."

Max nodded, knowing there wouldn't be a raincheck. Sure things had gotten a little better between the two of them, but Billy had become extremely distant. He wasn't the same violent asshole he used to be, but he was still moody and usually like just being alone. Still, Max couldn't help but feel sorry for him. Billy used his keys to unlock the door. They could faintly hear the TV going from the den. Billy knew better to avoid Neil at all costs, and headed straight to his bedroom.

Shutting the door behind him, he figured he could just save the shower for tomorrow morning. His hair smelled of pool chlorine, and he could still smell the lingering scent of his sweat and Heather from the sex earlier. Tired, he ran his hands through his tangled hair before sitting on his bed. Sitting in silence, he stared forward before shutting his eyes and slowly laying his body back. Taking a deep breath, he mentally thought of happier times, ignoring the horrible ache that continued to swell inside of him.

The next morning...

"Please don't let me go! Please!"

Little Holly Wheeler cried, putting a death grip around Billy's neck and tanned shoulders, crying and squirming in his arms. Billy believe it or not had his best patience at work with his swim lessons with the little ones than anything else. The pool always opened at eight where himself, Freddy, and Zoe would teach their small swim groups of five children each. Billy had the five year olds today, which was somewhat easy. His other four little kids were splashing in the shallow end, giggling, and basking in the early morning summer sunshine. Billy's schedule differed each week, but he honestly wasn't that bad. He did his swim lessons for an hour, before having an hour off while Heather took the first shift, before he went on for an hour. They would switch on and off for the remainder of the day. When he wasn't out at the pool, he was inside keeping stock of the chemicals, or spotting anyone willing to lift weights. It was an easy enough gig, the money was shit, but it was pretty easy, and he could spend most days sitting up on his stand working on his tan.

He found it as a good distraction, and liked the attention he got from

all those horny bitches who sat pool side watching him. He knew today was his chance to strike on Mrs. Wheeler. For the last month since the pool opened, he had been carefully watching her. Sure she was hot, but he knew if he continued flaunting his body like he usually did, and laid on that old fashion charm it would only be a matter of time before she was stupid enough to take him up on his offer. After that, his second hand video camera was waiting at the Motel 6. After that everything would fall into place and California would be waiting. Billy smirked, only up to his waist in the cool lapping water. He held onto little Holly Wheeler, and vaguely thought in the back of his mind what his daughter would have looked like had July lived? He typically couldn't stand children. Mostly after what happened back in California. He had pushed any angry thoughts about what happened behind him. He remembered his principle Mrs. Morgan, the high riding bitch always telling him over and over again that he was nothing more than a no good troublemaker. He remembered the scandal of Max letting the truth out about his affair to his English teacher to Neil. He remembered hearing about the abortion, and the beating he received following it.

Shortly after that they moved. But he was no longer angry at Max. He was the one who fucked up. He knew it. No, the anger with his step-sister was gone. Instead, thoughts of any of that bullshit were gone. Still, he did carry guilt over the abortion. He knew if his English teacher had come forward, telling him about the pregnancy he either would have told her to get lost, or just fork over the cash for her to take care of it. Still, he had countless nights of fantasies that July had recovered, and the two left town together to start over. He was certain he never wanted children, until he met July. He knew she would have made an amazing mother, and the very idea of a little girl with his dirty blond hair, and her green eyes made his chest ache. Snapping back to reality, he smiled calmly down at Holly Wheeler before he showed her she was safe.

"It's okay, you're safe..."

Holly's scared little blue eyes locked with his before she calmed down. Gently he eased her down into the water, holding her by her thin waist as he gently told her to kick her legs. Holly started doing so as Billy reassured her over and over again that she was perfectly

safe. Holly calmed down and began moving her arms and kicking her legs, finally allowing Billy to let her waist go and let him swim towards him less than a foot away. At the end of the lesson, he even got her to giggle as he cheered her on. Once the lessons were over, Freddy, Zoe, and himself gathered the kids to stay at the shallow end, which they roped off. They made sure their parents were watching, before climbing out. Before heading inside, little Holly Wheeler ran over, blond hair soaking wet as she smiled and wrapped her arms around him. Billy stood back, stiffened, and a little thrown off guard. Holly looked up and smiled.

"Thanks Billy! Mamma says maybe next year I can try the deep end!"

Billy squinted and looked across at all of the Hawkins' housewives sunning themselves. Mrs. Wheeler was looking pretty fine in her few bathing suit, watching him smiling. Billy knew when he switched off with Heather he would find a moment to be alone with her before striking.

The money was practically in his hand. Smiling, he looked down at Holly and faintly for a mere second thought of Max.

"Totally. Keep kicking those legs and you'll be there in no time."

Holly giggled before letting go and running back to her friends. Billy watched her, before eyeing Mrs. Wheeler one last time. Smirking, he turned and followed Zoe into the locker rooms. He passed Heather who smiled behind her sunglasses, and went to her post.

Walking, Billy felt the cool floors beneath his feet as Zoe was fixing her ponytail.

"Killer tattoo Bill."

Billy raised an eyebrow, snapping out of his own thoughts.

"Huh?"

Zoe playfully squeezed his tanned muscular arm where his tattoo was.

"This. I'm dying to get once once I'm eighteen. Does it mean

anything?"

Billy shrugged, knowing Zoe wanted to get into his pants just as bad as Heather.

"Just a design a friend made for me awhile back."

"Did it hurt?"

"Not at all."

Billy walked to the men's locker room, really not having much attention for Zoe's piss poor flirting. He was due to switch places with Heather in an hour, and that's when he was going to try and talk Mrs. Wheeler to join him at the motel 6. Walking to his locker, he opened it up to grab his pack of smokes. He figured he would grab a coke at the pop machine, and head around back to have a smoke. Glancing down at his arm, he looked at his skull tattoo smoking the cigarette and sighed. He had gotten it shortly after his birthday this spring. His father had been it, and simply rolled his eyes calling him white trash and didn't comment on it again.

The girls loved it, thinking it was so bad ass looking. But to Billy it had a different meaning. It was from an old crumpled up piece of notebook paper he found under his bed. A pice of paper July had sketched on and drew the skull while she was visiting him and helping him with his homework. She never got to see it. Frowning, he shook his head before grabbing a dollar for the pop machine and his lighter and smokes.

In less than an hour it would be showtime. Unknown to him in less than nine hours his entire world would come crashing down.

16. Lessons, news, and a crash

Early 1984

Susan and Neil were gone for the weekend. They were visiting Susan's cousin upstate for her wedding, which meant as always Billy had to watch the little shit and make sure nothing happened to her. Still, tonight was Friday and he had plans. Plans with a certain English teacher of his, and after that he planned on hitting up the guys at the surf bar and grab a few drinks thanks to the fake IDs they got last year, and maybe pick up a few chicks. Most Friday nights ended with Billy racing the guys by the beach, getting rip roaring drunk, and hitting up as many parties as possible before crashing on somebody's couch. He figured as long as he ordered Max a pizza, and threatened her to stay near the house he should be fine. Susan and his dad weren't due back until Sunday night, which meant he had the whole weekend to party.

Pulling into the driveway, Billy had his radio blasting, when he spotted Max using that stupid skateboard, coasting up and down the driveway. Rolling his eyes from behind his sunglasses, he parked, and killed the engine, before getting out.

"Hey shitbird!"

Max half turned, startled before she lost her footing. Billy had seen it happen thousands of times before when surfing, and knew she was going to wipe out. He drew in a quick breath, watching the board quickly roll out from beneath her, as her legs went in a panic claw for balance, before she fell down hard on her knees. Swearing under his breath, Billy knew this was the last thing he needed. Precious Max getting busted up for Susan and Neil to see only to blame him. Slamming his door, he gave a half jog towards her, as she was just starting to sit up. The hot California sun blazed down on them, as Max made a face, eyes snapping shut in pain as she turned over. Billy squatted down, and motioned to her half annoyed.

"Let's see the damage."

Max sighed, before half sitting up. She was wearing shorts, and both

knees were pretty badly scratched up. The skin was peeled back and bleeding. Billy sighed, taking his sunglasses off and tucking them into the collar of his T-shirt. Sighing he stared down, seeing tiny little pieces of gravel from the driveway in the bleeding raw flesh oof Max's freshly scraped knees.

"Shit, well...it's no blue ribbon winner, but these will do. Come on, let's get inside and get them cleaned up."

"I'm okay..."

Max said half embarrassed.

Billy shook his head.

"Listen, I got plans tonight and I can't be wasting time babying you. Get up so we can clean your knees up before Susan blames me for you being a spaz on that stupid thing again."

Max's eyes suddenly seemed to glimmer with tears for just a mere second. She sniffled, staring up at him with her big green eyes.

"It...hurts too much...just give me a second."

Rolling his eyes, Billy reached down and scooped her up in his arms. Max looked stunned as he slowly and carefully stood up. Max looked down stunned, before Billy began walking them towards the house.

"My board..."

"It's fine, it rolled a little under my car. Don't worry I won't run over it. I'll grab it later, come on."

Max looked a little overwhelmed as Billy held her and climbed the front steps, and carefully got the front door open. Max loosely held onto him, arms holding around his neck, as she looked around stunned he was even doing this. Once inside they reached the bathroom where he carefully sat her down on the bathroom counter. Billy right away went under the sink for the first aid kit. Standing, he opened up the plastic kit, having seen Max patch herself up from stupid skateboard injuries plenty of times. He himself used it only when Neil really went to town on him. Everything else could easily

be hidden underneath clothes. Grabbing stuff to clean the scrapes, Billy worked quickly and silently as he ran warm water, and grabbed a cotton ball to dab the areas of her scraped up knees.

The second he leaned over and did it, Max hissed out. Rolling his eyes, Billy shot her a look.

"Don't be such a pussy shitbird."

"I'm not, it just hurts."

Billy smirked.

"Oh man, somebody call the newspaper. Mad Max is hurt!"

Max rolled her eyes, smirking as Billy chuckled. Leaning down again to wipe the scrapes, Max leaned forward, planting her lips right against his. In a flash instant, Billy's eyes widened as he snapped back, dropping the cotton-ball.

"WHOA! MAX WHAT THE FUCK?!"

Max's freckled face instantly turned bright red. She lowered her eyes. Billy stood back, chest heaving when suddenly it all made sense. He had seen her stupid little diary left open in her room one day when he went to call her for dinner not that long ago. He couldn't believe he had pushed it out of his mind, dismissing it as nothing more than a harmless stupid crush. He had seen his name, written over and over again in her little diary with hearts. At first he felt disgusted, then simply walked out and forgot about it without her even knowing. Billy had plenty of girls drool over him, but Max was nearly four years younger than him, and his fucking step-sister. He couldn't stand the brat half the time, but truly couldn't believe he had pushed his out of his mind so quickly. Now it all made sense. Max stared up at him with pleading eyes.

"Billy I..."

"No really Max? What the fuck? I'm your fucking brother!"

"Step-brother...I know..."

Billy shook his head, somehow in the back of his mind completely terrified that his father would find out. He knew he didn't have time to deal with this shit. Shaking his head, he roughly wiped his mouth.

"You're fucking gross, stay away from me!"

"What? You like older women? Like teachers?"

Billy stood frozen.

"What the fuck did you just say?!"

Max glared at him before crossing his arms.

"Don't act so shocked Billy, you pretend like you're so slick and cool..."

Billy shook his head before he pointed a finger at her.

"You're messed up in the head little girl. Fuck off!"

With that he quickly left the bathroom, before slamming the door. He headed straight outside to his car, ignoring what very messed up thing just happened.

Unknown to him, Max decided to get even and it wasn't long before everything came crashing down, forcing them to leave California...

Monday July 1st 1985 - Present.

Billy sat on his chair, overlooking the pool. One half was free swim, while the other lanes were roped off for single swimmers. It was another blazing hot day, and Billy sat beneath the sun beating down on him.

"Looking good out there Mrs. Wheeler!"

Billy walked over, her towel she had left on one of the lounge chairs in his hands as she climbed out of the pool dripping wet. For an older woman she was pretty hot. Had a great body, nice face, great tits despite having three kids, but he felt she wore way too much eye makeup. Still, it was now or never, and Mrs. Wheeler was somebody

he had slowly been buttering up ever since last November when they first met. Back when he was forced to cancel his date with July, which was originally going to be their first time sleeping together. He remembered how badly Neil humiliated him in front of Susan to go find Max. He had come across Mrs. Wheeler looking around for Max. She was flirty, and pretty cute, and as the months went on he continued to run into her more and more. Now that she was a regular with her daughter at the pool, he set his sights on her to be his finally piece of the puzzle in leaving Hawkins for good.

She took the towel and smiled.

"Thank you."

"Perfect form."

"Well...your form is amazing..."

Billy had to laugh at how badly she was drooling over him. Instantly he saw her mentally curse herself as she rolled her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I mean...I've seen you teaching...lessons..."

"You know...I could teach you, if you like?"

He saw the stunned expression in her eyes and right away he knew he was going to have to convince her. This was probably the most excitement she had gotten in twenty years.

"Oh..."

"I know all the styles, freestyle...butterfly...breaststroke.."

He popped a piece of gum in his mouth, teasing it with his lips before Mrs. Wheeler dropped her towel. Chuckling, he reached and plucked it off the ground for her handing it back.

"You okay?"

She took the towel and smiled as she wrapped it around her waist.

"I didn't think you taught adults..."

"Well more of advance lessons to select clientele..."

He saw she was getting nervous as he stepped forward, not caring if anybody was paying attention. "

Come to this about it, there is a good pool ut at the Motel 6 on Conwall st very quite very private shall we say tonight 8 o clock? "

I'm sorry I can't."

"Can't what have fun Mrs wheeler?"

He chuckled, loving this.

"No, I just...just... I don't think I need any lessons."

Billy leaned in close, gazing at her, showing a hunger, as he caught her breathing increase, watching the top swell of her bathing suit continue going up and down.

"No, see that's where I think you're wrong. You haven't had the right teacher. It...will be...the workout...of your life."

That's when he knew he had her. She lifted her eyes, and smiled at him, no longer nervous, no longer blushing. She looked ten years younger, and he could tell by her breathing she was excited. Smiling, she stared at him, before softly whispering.

"Okay. I'll meet you there at eight."

Billy grinned.

"Perfect."

He knew that was just enough, as he winked at her and continued walking towards the locker rooms. His shift was over, and he planned on changing quick, swing by the cemetery, and go home to catch a quick nap, do his chores, and start setting everything up for tonight. Billy didn't feel guilty about what he was planning on doing too Mrs. Wheeler. In his mind she deserved it, and if things went as planned, he would be richer, and ready to leave this Hell hole once and for all. He knew he would sorta miss Max. Even though things weren't great

between the two of them, he was still protective of her in his own way.

He left her be, mostly hanging out with those nerds, and dating that punk Lucas. If Susan and Neil didn't care, he knew he shouldn't either. Still, he had decided to forget the past, knowing it was just some schoolgirl crush she had grown out of. He didn't blame her for ratting to Neil about his affair with his teacher. They were the ones who were wrong, and as sad as it ended, he knew it was meant to be. If they hadn't moved, he wouldn't have gotten those few brief happy months with July. He summoned an image of her smiling at him, and he couldn't believe how badly he missed her. Everything would have been different if she was alive. He figured they would have all ready have gotten married. They would have gone to town hall, even if Neil was against it. He would have moved out and into the Criss', he would work as much as possible to save up, finally having the family he so badly wanted. He would end up driving out of Hawkins with his sweet July he figured before the holidays this upcoming fall, hopefully with Criss' blessing. He knew he would have missed Max, but promise her once they got settled she could visit as much as she wanted. He would finally tell Neil where to stick it, and leave with July leaning against him as he drove away from everything and towards a happy future with her.

He day dreamed that he would find work quickly, maybe a surf shop. He would rent a small beach cottage, and not mind busting his ass, as long as it was to take care of July. He thought of nights of them laying on a bare mattress in their tiny beach house, listening to records, drinking cheap wine, having great sex, and watching the sunrise every weekend. He would teach her how to surf, and while she went to school for her degree, he would start teaching surf lessons. He thought of someday in a future that was never meant to be. He could see July, her beautiful dark hair back, blowing around her, wearing a sundress, pregnant, laughing, and waving to him. Instead, July was dead, and here he was about to screw some horny housewife and blackmail her to escape alone. As Billy headed to his locker, he pushed that constant exhausting ache away, as he went to get dressed.

"Billy?"

Billy glanced over, and saw Heather. She had on a light summer jacket over her suit, and shorts pulled up. She seemed nervous, her backpack swung over her shoulder. Billy raised an eyebrow.

"You out of here early? Thought you were closing?"

"Um, no...Katie is taking my shift. I gotta go to the doctor."

Billy didn't seem very interested, and nodded as he continued to walk. Heather sighed, her eyes slightly filling up with tears as she shifted from one foot to another.

"Billy?"

Annoyed, Billy turned at her.

"What?!"

He snapped. Heather sighed, too embarrassed as she blinked her tears away.

"Nothing...I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Yeah okay, whatever."

Billy headed to the men's locker room as Heather gripped the strap of her pack, and turned away, holding back her tears as she hurried out.

Later... Billy stepped out of the shower, naked, and dripping wet. Grabbing a towel, he began drying off, before walking to the mirror and wiped it clean with his hand. Smiling, he knew he had to start getting ready even though it was still fairly early. He planned on styling his hair, and picking out his tightest jeans for this occasion. When he got home, he lifted weights for an hour, listening to music, before making himself a sandwich, and mowing the back yard. He took the trash out, and did some weed whacking, before coming back inside having built up a pretty good sweat. Susan had just gotten home with bundles from the market and was unloading them in the fridge. Billy came in to grab a beer, something neither Neil or Susan even batted an eyelash over since he bought his own 6-packs somehow. Cracking one open, he asked Susan if she needed any help? Susan smiled and shook her head.

"I'm all set."

Billy nodded, leaning against the counter watching her.

"Where's Max?"

Susan shrugged.

"I think she's out playing, said she won't be back until dinner. Will you be home?"

Billy thought of the video camera and tripod laying in the trunk of his car and smirked.

"No, I have a date."

Susan smiled as she put some jars away.

"Well have fun, and if you ever want, feel free to bring her over for dinner."

Billy nodded, draining his beer and tossing it in the trash. He knew he would never bring another girl here. Thoughts of the few nights July came over, usually to help him with his homework, and how Neil always looked her up and down as if he was above her, as if he looked down on her for being sick even though she was polite, and so friendly. He remembered one evening when Susan and Neil were both working late and Max was out with her friends that the two of them had gotten frisky in the kitchen, almost exactly where he stood. He had been horny that night, and had scooped July up, planting her on the counter. He remembered her giggles, saying they shouldn't since his dad could walk in any second? Somehow this made everything so much more exciting, it turned him on, and he reached up, pulling her panties down from under her skirt. July laughed against him, as he unbuttoned his jeans, and pulled down his zipper. He wasn't wearing any underwear, and his penis popped out almost instantly, strained, and pulsing. He took her legs by the knees, spreading them wide, before stepping in close, wrapping his hand around his cock, and entered her. She stiffened, hissing out, before he stopped. Freezing for a second, he pressed his forehead against hers.

"You okay?"

July tilted her hips towards him, before nodding.

"You have the biggest cock Mr. Hargrove...why don't you show me how you work it?"

This was a little game they played, and it drove Billy mad. He grinned, before he pumped his ass against her. He thrust in, making her cry out, before he clutched onto her, pumping away as her legs slowly wrapped around him. They had sex a total of three times that hour in this kitchen, the last time he took her doggystyle right where Susan was folding the brown paper bags from the market to put away and use for a later use. He sadly smiled remembering that, knowing tonight as he screwed Mrs. Wheeler's brains out, he would pretend it was his July with him. Without saying another word, he left and began to get ready. Now in the bathroom, he grabbed the blowdryer and began to make sure he looked good for Karen. He at least wanted to make sure she got her money's worth. Chuckling, he continued fixing his hair, having no idea what was in store for him.

Elsewhere...

Heather sat on the doctor's examining table, her eyes big and filling with tears. She had taken her car, and drove to Treemount, which was fifty miles out of Hawkins. She had lied saying to her mother she was working late, when she actually drove all the way out here for her appointment. Jessica, a girlfriend of hers and mentioned this doctor, and she knew she couldn't take any chances going to hers in Hawkins. This was far too big. The entire ride over, she tried listening to music to take her mind off the heavy cloud that had settled over her. She sat in the waiting room, nervously picking at her nails, now dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. The doctor was a friendly middle aged man, who examined her, and even took a blood test. He then took a urine sample. The nurse who helped was comforting, but Heather couldn't believe the shame in her heart. While she waited, she prayed more than anything that she was wrong. That this would be a false alarm, and she would stop these nonsense with Billy, and go back to her regular carefree life.

When the doctor came in, he smiled as she sat in her paper gown, arms crossed feeling on edge.

"Well, I won't get the blood tests back for a few days, but the urine sample was positive. You are pregnant."

Heather sat back as everything seemed to zero in on those three words.

You are pregnant.

She couldn't believe it. How could she have been so stupid? The doctor continued to talk about her options, including coming back later this week. Heather meanwhile sat frozen, eyes wide and terrified, having absolutely no idea how she was going to tell her parents? She knew daddy was going to kill her. Thinking of Billy, she knew he would freak, leaving her to decide whatever was next alone. Cursing herself, she couldn't believe she had been stupid enough to really think a guy like Billy would really like her, or give a shit if something like this happened to her? Now here she was, eighteen, scared out of her mind...and pregnant. Pregnant with Billy Hargrove's child. She honestly didn't know what she was going to do?

That night... Billy was on his way to the motel. It was a little after seven, and he planned on heading out there, parking in the back, paying for the room, and setting the camera up in the closet, making sure it had a perfect shot through one of the wooden slates to capture the little home movie Mrs. Wheeler and himself were going to make. He was pretty giddy. He had gotten ready, and had to admit, he really did look good. He grabbed some condoms, and lube he had bought, tossing them in his jacket pocket, as he blasted his music, and took the back highway which overlooked most of the farmland. Tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, he eyed his reflection in the rearview mirror. He felt a surge of excitement go over him as he smiled, and looked at himself again.

"Hi Karen..."

He reached and adjusted the mirror.

"I can call you Karen? Good...that's good."

It was the same little back and forth he played out in his mind earlier while getting ready looking at his reflection. He knew exactly what to

say to get this little housewife worked up and ready. He smiled, loving this plan, when suddenly something crashed against his windshield. Feeling his heart jump in his throat as it startled him, he suddenly lost control of the car. It spun, as he tried to regain the wheel, before it went off the road and crashed hard against an old empty factory that sat on the side of the road. Hitting his head on the wheel, pain burst through him, before he heard the click of the engine, and the faint hiss of the radiator. He groaned, lifting his head, before touching the tender spot on his temple. Rolling his eyes he looked at the spiderweb crack over the windshield, unable to believe what just happened? Crawling out, he swore under his breath, before looking at the car. He couldn't believe it had run off the road like that. He saw brand new fresh dents and bangs into the body to go along with the newly cracked windshield.

Three thoughts played through his mind. First Neil would see, and even though this was Billy's car he would give him shit for banging it up. Second, this windshield and damage was going to cost him, and third his little whack on his head which hurt like Hell might ruin things would Mrs. Wheeler tonight? Annoyed, he felt anger begin to build up as he looked at the damage.

"You piece of shit!"

He kicked the rear tire, when suddenly he heard something in the dark. He froze, looking around. That's when he wondered, what had hit the car to make it lose control like that? He froze, listening. "Who's there?" He called out. He looked around, when suddenly something grabbed onto him. Billy's eyes widened in surprise as he threw him down and began dragging him into the dark factory. His shirt rode up, as he felt dirt and gravel scrape over him. He struggled, but was unable to get free. Whatever this was pulled him with enough force that he thought his ankle might break. He screamed as it continued dragging him through the factory, before nearly bringing him down the basement stairs. Grabbing onto the doorway, he was too scared to turn around. He cried out as the pure force of it made him think he was going to get ripped apart. He strained, fighting as hard as he could not to get dragged and taken down there. He knew whatever this was, it was going to kill him. He prayed to just wake up. That this was just some vivid nightmare.

That none of this was real. He would wake up, and maybe it was early November. He might be in bed with July, safe and sound...

That's when he lost his grip, and he was pulled violently down into the darkness.

17. Are you hurt?

Billy scrambled up the metal stairs, tripping over his feet, hitting his knee hard, as he burst through the door, and breaking off into a full fledge run. His legs pumping, he ran as fast as he could, through the massive abandoned warehouse, the faint smell of rust, and dampness filled his nostrils, as he continued to run as fast as he could, heart hammering out of his chest, before he made it to his car. In a complete panic, he never in his entire life felt so scared. Everything had happened so fast, all he knew was whatever had grabbed him was still there, and it might be chasing him. Ripping the door open, he threw himself behind the wheel, and prayed the engine would start. Luckily it roared to life before he slammed down on the gas, hearing the tires grind against the gravel. Sweat and blood rolled down his face, as he made it down the back road.

A thousand thoughts raced through his, as he pushed the car to nearly eighty. That's when he saw the phone booth and felt a heavy sweep of relief go through him. Slamming on the breaks, hearing the tires screech, he hit his steering-wheel, before throwing it into park, and nearly fell out. Running to the phone booth, he picked the phone up, hearing the dial tone, as he shoved his hand into the front pocket of his jeans, and almost dropped the dime twice. With shaking hands, he put he coin in, and dialed. Within seconds, the connection opened up after the first ring as an official sounding dispatcher spoke.

"911 what is your emergency?"

Billy's wide eyes looked through the glass of the booth at the darkness around him. Suddenly he felt very frightened. That's when the thick fog clears, and he remembered. Something had latched onto him, dragging him across the warehouse. His ribs and stomach hurt from being dragged. he could feel the tenderness of being dragged and scraped against the gravel and floor. He didn't know what gotten him. Everything happened within seconds. He had been dragged down to the basement, hitting every single step. He had been flipped over, and that's when he saw it. He wasn't sure exactly what "it" was. But it reminded him of some horrible science fiction monster from the movies. It smelled like rotting meat, and chemicals. It was

massive, and didn't exactly have a shape. It pinned him down and all he saw was teeth. He tried to scream when it latched onto his face, covering his nose and mouth. It cut his scream off, and suddenly he felt something being pumped into him. He struggled, but it pinned him down. Whatever it was, it was awful, and burned all the way down. He was violated, raped, being forceful entering him. When it ripped off him, he rolled over, nearly vomiting, before he rolled over and ran. What was he going to say?

A creature, monster, alien? What would they say? Would they laugh? Call him crazy? Hang up?

He dropped the phone, faintly hearing the voice on the other line ask if he was still there. That's when he raised an eyebrow, and looked around. The sky looked weird. It kept lighting up, casting a storage hazy red and purple color. Blindly, he pushed open he phone booth, never taking his eyes off the sky as he stumbled out. The air seemed thick, and things were swirling around. He wandered out onto the empty road and knew something wasn't right. It seemed different. He swayed, standing in front of his car, before staring ahead. There were people, approaching him, all standing in the shadows.

He stepped forward when suddenly he felt his stomach drop. Standing ahead of the crowd of thirty, forty people standing in the shadows was him. Looking exactly as he did, almost as if he was staring in the mirror at his own reflection minus the dirt and blood. He felt his heart get caught in his throat as he stared, completely speechless.

"What...do you want?"

He asked, frightened, and unable to allow his mind to wrap around what he was seeing. His doppelgänger stared at him with calm cool eyes and spoke in a deep voice much like his own, but something sinister beneath it. He stepped closer, both staring at each other.

"We want you to build."

Billy stared, before suddenly they disappeared, leaving him alone in the road.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND!"

He shouted. Suddenly a horrible cramp overcame him, clenching his stomach he gritted his teeth together, before he laced his hands, and cried out. His knees giving out, he fell down hard, whacking his all ready tender knees. Instantly he felt as if he was being torn apart from the inside out. He knelt on the gravel and began to dry heave. After a solid minute, he finally knew nothing was coming up besides spit.

Groaning, he rolled over on his back, not caring if a car could be coming. Instead he laid back, chest heaving as he stared up now at the clear night sky. Something was wrong. He knew it. At first he thought maybe he should go straight to the police. Get that asshole Hopper, and tel him what happened. Suddenly he could see it now, him explain that some creature had dragged him into the basement and deep throated him. How he saw himself, telling him he needed to build. What exactly? He wasn't sure. Yep, he could see it now, those pigs laughing at him, before convincing themselves he was either drunk or high, and toss him in the cell for the night. Neil would come and get him in the morning, and beat the ever living shit out of him. He would probably get it the worse than he ever had before. He remembered after the whole scandal around them being to California how bad things had gotten, costing him a few broken bones, and pissing blood for a week, No, he couldn't go to anyone, they would think he was crazy, and nothing would change.

Instead he simply laid there, pain in his chest every time he took a deep breath in or out. Any thoughts of Mrs. Wheeler were gone. At this exact moment all he wanted to do was get home, crawl into bed, shut his eyes, and forget about this nightmare. Weakly, he slowly sat up, hissing at how tender his ribs hurt, he looked around frightened. Maybe this was a dream? Maybe he had hit his head when whatever that thing was that caused him to crash.

Maybe... It was the only thing that made sense. He slowly got up, bracing himself against the car, before he limped, and crawled inside. Everything hurt. Taking a small steady breath that still hurt, he started up the engine, before slowly driving down the road. He was sure Neil would have plenty to say about the huge crack on the windshield even though Billy paid for all car repairs. Still, he would

have some comment about it, and more than likely his backhand waiting for him. Pushing that away, he drove slowly, not even carrying about standing Karen up. All he wanted was to strip out of these clothes, grab July's scarf he kept hidden underneath some things in his dresser, and just fall asleep. Driving, completely unaware, his eyes began to fill with frightened tears.

Later...

"Billy?" Billy groaned, rolling over slightly. He was holding July's scarf, and had fallen into a deep slumber the second his head hit the pillows. The drive home had kept him on edge, his nerves just a series of pins and needles, as he kept glancing from side to side, ready to slam on the breaks, or speed away at any sign of trouble. Once he parked in front of the house, his ribs were ready starting to bother him. He killed the engine, looking glumly at the windshield, before getting out. The street was dark, and Billy's eyes drifted over to July's house. The people who lived there now were friendly enough, and had planted rose bushes by each side of the front porch.

He stared up at July's bedroom window, and wished her so badly it hurt. If she was still alive he would have raced home, and climbed up by the porch to be let in by her window. He remembered in late November, sneaking up to her window. He remembered they had sex that night. He remembered how even though they didn't need them, he had worn a condom. This was the very beginning of when they started sleeping together. He did it as a comfort thing for her, even though he loved screwing without wearing one since they pinched, and didn't feel as good when he worn them. He had sat on the edge of the bed, ripping the small foil package open with his teeth, He took out the lubed up condom, and had lowered his underwear, holding onto his all ready hard cock as he carefully rolled the condom over his shaft, July sat beside him, fascinated watching him. Billy bit his bottom lip, before he felt like it was on completely. Glancing over, he saw July's expression and lightly chuckled.

"What?" July leaned down smiling.

"Looks weird?"

"What my dick?"

July laughed before shrugging.

"Yeah, sorta..."

"Well, I am wearing a rubber. You ready?"

July tucked some of her hair behind her ear, before she laid back, and carefully spread her legs. Billy grinned, kicking off his boots, jeans, and underwear. He pulled his T-shirt off, before he carefully crawled on top of her. He saw she was still nervous, and found it adorable. Smiling, he leaned down kissing the side of her neck.

"Spread your legs, and scoot down a little..."

July did go, before looking up.

"Like this?"

Billy adjusted himself, before suddenly feeling as if he was about to blow his load. Taking a second, he stared ahead, before sinking completely in. Her legs slowly were drawn upward, allowing him to settle in. Taking a second, he nodded, before staring down.

"You okay?"

July looked a little uncomfortable, before she relaxed, and nodded. Grabbing onto his shoulders, she took a slow breath out.

"Okay, move slow..."

Billy took a second, before suddenly he shook his head, his face becoming flushed as he fought the building sensation. His face became flushed, as he thrust in once, twice, and then suddenly swore as loud as he could, muffling it against her shoulder before climaxing. Groaning, he collapsed against her. He climaxed so hard, his head actually ached, as he lowered his head, angry as well as embarrassed. This was the second time he had blown his load way too early. Still, instead of being angry or downright embarrassed, July allowed him to be comfortable enough to be himself. He knew it was because she was so Goddamn tight, and being inside of her drove him absolutely mad. He remembered July's slender fingertips drumming on his back.

"Did you come?"

Billy sighed, lifting his head, his hair hanging down in sweaty strings. He blushed before rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, did you feel it?"

July shrugged beneath him, before she reached up, brushing his hair away from her face.

"It's okay, we can try again..."

Billy sighed, pulling out of her and rolling over. Frustrated, he reached down and snapped off the condom, which was filled with his jizz. He made a disgusted face, before he grabbed a tissue from the box on her nightstand, and crumpled it into it. He mentally reminded himself to remember to toss it in her wastepaper basket and bury it underneath some more tissues in case Mrs. Criss did some cleaning in there. He laid back, right beside July and stared up at the ceiling.

"I hate wearing those things..."

July hiked herself up on one elbow and traced tiny circles over Billy's flat tanned stomach, before lightly tickling the tiny trail of hair that led down beneath the sheet. He bit the insides of his cheeks from laughing, as he glanced over at her. July locked eyes with him.

"You don't need to, I trust you're clean."

"Huh?"

"Condoms, you don't need to wear anymore. As long as you're telling the truth about being clean...you don't have to wear them anymore."

"Really? Aren't you...like...scared about me knocking you up?"

July laughed, a true sound that was filled with happiness. Something that Billy absolutely loved. Billy made a face.

"What?"

"I told you, I don't get my period anymore because of the medications

I'm on. You can't get my pregnant."

Billy stared at her, waiting for the punchline before it saw she wasn't joking.

"You're serious?"

"Yeah, I am."

Billy stared at her.

"Are you...sure? Like are you comfortable. I don't mind wearing them..."

"No, it's okay."

"Yeah well...what if you're wrong? What if I do get you pregnant?"

"Impossible."

"Please, I know better than anyone never to say impossible when it comes to sex. Seriously what if I knock you're pretty ass up little lady?"

July laughed and shook her head.

"Trust me, I know my own body and it isn't possible."

"But what if?"

July continued rubbing his stomach, lightly tickling him. She shrugged.

"I guess we would cross that bridge once we reach it, even though it isn't possible."

"Do you want kids someday?"

July shrugged again.

"Never thought that far ahead of the future, one of the many downfalls of being sick."

"I think we would make pretty kick ass looking kids."

July laughed.

"Is that a fact?"

Billy nodded and turned towards her. He scooted closer underneath the covers, his flat stomach, touching hers. He lightly rubbed the side of her arm, as she stared up at him, making him slowly feel his penis start to twitch to life. Billy's hand continued rubbing her side, before going down and sliding against her smooth ass.

"Absolutely, they would be gorgeous...and have amazing hair."

July cracked up before she leaned in, and nuzzled against his chest, playing with his necklace.

"You're crazy you know that?"

Billy smiled, staring down at her.

"Yeah, crazy about you..."

Now Billy found himself getting torn from that pleasant memory of a dream. He clung to any dreams of July, mostly the ones involving sex. As always whenever he woke from one of those, he felt wired and horny as Hell. He usually would grab one of his skin magazines, jerk off, before heading to the shower. Waking, his eyelids almost refused to open. His stomach ached, and his head throbbed. He heard the voice, pulling him from the vivid image of holding July in his arms as it began to scramble and break up before his very own eyes. Desperate, he tried to cling to it, before he woke, and saw Max standing there. It was early, he could tell from the thin morning light coming through the blinds. The first thing he thought was he had to cover himself in case he had a nice stiff morning erection. Instead, he found his penis limp and laying against his inner thigh despite the vivid dream he had just been having. He blinked, his throat dry, as he stared up at her. Usually if she woke him up this early he would flip. Sometimes he would roll over, muttering the same line over and over

"Get out shitbird..."

This was usually since he was hungover, and didn't want her to ask him for a ride to the arcade. Today, suddenly last night's events came back to him like a brick wall, hitting him like an ice cold bucket of water. Everything that happened replayed. The crash, whatever that thing was grabbing him, being dragged down to the basement, and that thing pumping inside of him. He remembered getting loose, running for his life, speeding down the road, and then seeing those people. He remembered seeing himself and hearing the thick low sounding words say... "We want you to build." He was left screaming that he didn't understand...

That had all really happened, he was certain. Part of his mind didn't want to believe it. He wanted to think maybe he had dreamed it, or had hit his head when his car went off the road. There was no way that could have even been possible. His stomach cramped, and he snapped his eyes shut for a second before blinking and looking up.

"What do you want shitbird?"

Max shot him a look, giving a small smile before holding up her skateboard.

"I need to borrow your screwdriver, my rear wheel is coming off."

Billy's first reaction was to snap at her, tell her to get the Hell out, and turn over. Instead, he sighed, blinking the sleep from his eyes, making sure Max couldn't see he was holding onto one of July's scarfs, even though he was certain she knew about it.

"In the garage, on the workbench in my toolbox. Just make sure to put it back."

Max nodded, muttering a thanks before she left. Billy was left alone for a second, faintly hearing birds chirp in the background. Staring up, he tried to clearly remember his dream with July, but like always it seemed to vanish as soon as he woke up. Sitting, he took a second, and knew something wasn't quite right. He was wearing a pair of boxers, that he didn't remember changing into. He looked down and saw how scuffed up and bruised his knees were. He touched them, feeling the tender flesh, and sighed, before standing, and limping over to his mirror. Shirtless, he was able to examine himself better.

He had some pretty nasty bruises, and fresh scrapes and cuts. He looked himself over carefully knowing he might need to swallow some aspirin. He shuffled down the hall to the bathroom, when another stomach cramp overtook him. Clinging to the bathroom counter, he moaned, before trying to use the bathroom. After a good ten minutes of trying, he knew nothing was happening. Feeling too weak to shower, he splashed some cold water on his face, and shuffled back to his bedroom. Grabbing a pair of swing trunks, he put on a black tank-top, and stared at his reflection. He couldn't believe how awful he looked. His muscles ached, and his head pounded. Cold sweat was rolling off him, as he swayed.

For a second, he ran his hand over the back of his neck, feeling for a fever. He knew he was stupid for going in. Something awful had happened, and part of him screamed to head straight to the hospital. Instead, he grabbed his car keys, and headed out, even if he was early. On his way out, he saw Max practicing on that stupid skateboard of hers. "I put the screwdriver back, thanks Billy!" Billy nodded, as he squinted, even though the clouds hadn't broken up yet. He felt dizzy, and weak, and knew the sooner he sat down behind the wheel of his car and cranked the A.C the better. He nodded, before Max rolled over to him.

"Going to work early?"

Billy nodded, trying not to make eye contact.

"Yeah...be careful on that thing."

He walked past her, yanking open the door, before staring the engine and heading down the road. Max raised an eyebrow, figuring Billy might have been out partying all night and that's why he looked so pale. She continued practicing tricks in the street until a few hours later when Eleven came by asking for advice.

Later...

Billy headed into work early. His stomach was growling, but he knew he wasn't hungry. The sun made his eyes feel sensitive, and his head ached. He suddenly felt as if he was on autopilot. Somebody else was operating him. He didn't remember certain details, only that he had

parked his car, and walked in. He had the chills, and felt like he was going to puke. Suddenly his stomach gurgled for something, and as if he was in a trance, he found himself headed straight to the back closet where they kept the chemicals. He passed people, ignoring their hellos, as he walked straight forward. He was one of the few people who worked at the pool that had keys to the chemical closet. Usually Freddy took care of the upkeep of the pool, as well as Carl, who's uncle worked for the mayor and spent most of his time sitting behind the desk inside with the A.C going, flirting with Candy his assistant, reading magazines, sipping pop from the machine, and making those stupid ass schedules. Billy was just thankful they hadn't spotted him, or Heather since she had been super clingy lately. He unlocked the door, the strong smell of chemicals hitting him, and almost as if a magic wand had been waved, the nausea he had been feeling stopped. He was grateful for the dim shadows of the closet, and the coolness as he stood before the shelves and boxes and jugs. He suddenly no longer felt in control. Somebody else was working him, yet again on autopilot. He saw his hand reach up for the jugs of chlorine and bleach. He saw his hands twist off the cap of bleach, and then uncap the jug of chlorine. He watched himself lift the jug of bleach, and pour it into the half filled jug of chlorine, not caring that some was splashing and spilling.

It filled to the top, before he grabbed the cap, and twisted it on. The scent was enough to make anyone light headed or puke, instead to him at this exact moment he smelled wonderful. His stomach growled for it, as he gave the jug a good shake, before he unscrewed it. He threw the cap down, breathing heavy and his inner voice screamed...

DON'T!

Instead, he watched as he lifted the jar, put it to his lips, and tilted it upwards. He began to guzzle the chlorine and bleach like it was beer. He felt it burn as it went down his throat and hit his stomach. His gag relax fought to vomit, but he kept it down. He shut his eyes, feeling tears squeeze out as he continued to guzzle it with big sloppy gulps. He drank half the jug, before he suddenly felt good. The horrible aching in his stomach had vanished. He felt relieved as if this deadly combination of chemicals had cured him. He sighed, setting down the jug onto the shelf having no idea what he had just done. Even if Billy

had survived in the days to follow, this lethal dose of chemicals would have killed him. For Billy, this was the beginning of the end. Setting the chemicals down, he heard Karen come in. She was behind him, apologizing for not showing up last night, talking some bullshit about her family. Billy felt his pulse pound as he stared forward, anger bubbling up. Stupid fucking Mrs. Wheeler. If he hadn't been driving to go screw the stupid bitch, whatever that thing was at the warehouse wouldn't have gotten him. Now his plans had fallen through. The money, the plans for California, everything didn't seem important. He had just drank enough chemicals to kill him, and he felt trapped inside his own body. He imagined grabbing Karen's head and slamming it against the shelf, hard enough to crack her skull. In a mere second that image broke apart, as tears squeezed out of his eyes. He knew he was no longer in control, and whatever had happened to him was going to make damn sure he was going to suffer. He stood there, and fought the urge to grab and kill her. The little bit of control he still had, fought the urge to grab and attack her. Taking a deep breath, he turned as she was in the middle of talking, no longer caring if she saw the tears in his eyes. He stared at her and his real voice came out.

"Stay away from me Karen."

Karen stared with startled eyes as he pushed past her and outside into the blinding sunlight. He hated to be this way, but at least Mrs. Wheeler would think he was pissed off and offended somehow. That way she wouldn't keep drooling over him like a little puppy dog and get herself hurt. He knew something was seriously wrong, and he wasn't able to fully control it. He nearly stumbled out, walking to his chair. It was his shift, even though he felt like he was dying inside. Heather passed him, and looked nervous, before he saw her catch some other girls staring at them. She lowered her sunglasses and cleared her throat.

"Looking good Billy..."

He continued walking forward, the sun was nearly blinding. He bumped into people, as the housewives all minus Mrs. Wheeler smiled.

"Afternoon Billy."

He barley reached his chair, struggling to climb up, before he collapsed against the plastic chair. He sighed, exhausted as he squinted, the sun feeling like a million degrees. Everything hurt, as he snapped his eyes shut, praying that this pain would leave his body, even for just a second. He felt his stomach turn, still tasting the chemicals, having no idea he was all ready half dead...

Elsewhere...

Heather watched Billy from afar. He sat under the umbrella, eyes shut, head hung down low. He didn't look good. In fact, he didn't look good at all. She nervously bit down on her bottom lip watching him. Something was wrong, something was seriously wrong with him. Last night after she came home from her doctor's appointment, she had returned home and lied to her mother that she had bad cramps and was going to head to bed early. Instead, she laid awake, turning over the thousands of different options of played through her mind. She knew if her parents found out they would first kill him. She could see daddy arriving at his house with his shotgun. Then, they would make him marry her, even if he refused. She could see it now, her mother breaking down crying, and her daddy shaking his head, telling her how disappointed he was with her. She could see them forcing Billy's parents to sit down with them, and the breakdowns and fights that would follow. She knew Billy had only used her for sex, and how badly he would flip out when Heather's parents announced she wouldn't be getting an abortion. She wasn't eighteen, which meant if she wanted one she needed her parents consent. Plus the money, even though she was certain would go unnoticed, her mother still was co-signer of her savings, and would see her withdraw that much cash from her account and question it.

She knew if she went to Billy he would flip out completely. She laid awake all night trying to weigh the options and figure out what she would say to him. She didn't believe in abortion, but knew there was no way she could throw her future away like this, mostly if Billy wanted nothing to do with her. That morning, she fought back morning sickness, as she got ready and headed to the pool. Staring at her flat stomach, she knew she was carrying a ticking time bomb within her. Katie was gabbing to her about her date with Tony last night, and Heather pretended she was listening. She sat in the shade,

watching Billy and sighed before she cut Katie off and motioned over to him.

"Notice anything strange with Billy?"

Katie blew a large bubble with her gum and shrugged.

"No more than usual. He's probably hung over poor baby. You two aren't still screwing around are you?"

Heather shot her a look, before rolling her eyes.

"Grow up Katie..."

Katie laughed as Heather told her she was gonna hit the showers. She actually had the rest of the afternoon off, but figured she would stick around and try and get Billy alone. She knew she couldn't put this off much longer, and needed to approach him. Maybe, just maybe he would have an idea on what to do...

Later...

Heather had hit the showers, changed, and grabbed something quick to eat. Once the hour was over, she watched Billy stumble into the lockers, holding his arm which appeared badly burned. He kept bumping into people, and even knocked over a cooler. He seemed drugged, and unable to really walk. People watched, as he stumbled into the locker room. At this time of the day nobody was really inside since it was free swim. Heather sighed, feeling her heart hammer in her chest before she walked up to the dark locker room, and sighed. She followed him in, and heard the shower running. Nobody else was inside. She walked over and saw Billy laying on the floor. He was fully clothed, soaking wet, shaking, and looking deathly ill. Concerned, Heather squatted down.

"Billy? Are you okay? Billy? Are you hurt? Should I call an ambulance?"

Billy looked out of it, his soaking wet hair hanging in his face. He raised an eyebrow and stared at her.

"What?"

Heather sighed.

"I said are you hurt? Should I call an ambulance?"

Billy's hands curled into fists, before he lunged at her. Heather screamed, but he dragged her down onto the wet tile covered floor. He climbed on top of her, pinning her down, slapping his large hand across her mouth. Her screams were cut off, as she stared up with wide frightened eyes. He glared down at her, his eyes dark, and not looking his own.

"Don't scream...if you scream I'll snap your neck like a twig. Understand?"

Heather slowly nodded, before Billy slowly removed his hand. Heather laid beneath the shower, water pouring down and soaking her. She whimpered, tears filling her frightened eyes as she looked up. He raised his fist, his hand curling up tight, ready to heave down and strike her...

"Billy...please don't hurt me. I'm pregnant!"

Billy hesitated, his fist shaking for a second, before he raised an eyebrow, and the real Billy flickered behind his eyes which were filled with rage. He stared down.

"What?"

His voice was thick and low. Heather cried out and nodded.

"You can check in my locker, I have the paperwork from the doctor. It's yours...I'm pregnant. Please don't hurt our baby...I'm sorry Billy I'm..."

Before she could say another word his expression changed as his fist curled up again and he brought his fist down with all of his might. He slammed his fist down, knocking her out cold. Chest heaving, he knew he could grab some rope from the supply closet, and drag her to the trunk of his car without anybody seeing if he was fast. He stood up, dripping wet, as he went to work. Within minutes, he had tied Heather up and threw her in his trunk. He had parked near the rear entrance, and luck had been with him since nobody happened to

see. He slammed the trunk closed, before knowing his next stop would be the warehouse.

He glared around, feeling as if he wasn't in control again. Heather's words meant nothing to him, as he circled around and got into his car, not knowing that he was not only destroying his life and Heather's, but his unborn child's as well.

18. Last night home

Later...

Heather whimpered as Billy slowly peeled off the duct tape off her mouth. He had tied her up using rope from the supply closet at the pool, hauling her body up, throwing her over his shoulder, as he dumped her into her truck, carefully looking and making sure nobody was watching. For Billy he was on autopilot, he felt as if he was trapped beneath the frozen surface of a lake. He felt trapped, but something else was controlling his body. He felt as if he was trapped inside his body, looking through his eyes completely horrified at what he was doing, feeling the shadow of whatever was taking him over, doubling in strength.

Earlier he lost control, watching himself walk to the supply closet. His stomach ached, and he suddenly felt very weak. In a trance he watched as he opened up the jugs of pool chemicals, before he lifted them, and poured the liquid down his throat. Guzzling it as if he was doing a keg-stand, earning the title of "Keg King" from that idiot Steve last October when he first took July out on their first date. He remembered certain details of that night, such as him lifting her up and kissing her in a complete frenzy in the bathroom, drunk, and extremely turned on. Now those few wonderful months he had shared with her were gone, and he stood with wide terrified eyes as he felt the burning chemicals pour down his throat and into his stomach. The urge to vomit vanished, as he suddenly felt the horrible ache within him slowly settle down. It was as if whatever was inside of him had caved this. Still, he knew this shit he was drinking could kill him, and within two minutes he had swallowed at least a solid gallon. Completely terrified, he slammed down the jug, feeling it dribble down his chin when stupid Mrs. Wheeler walked in, talking some nonsense to him. He saw in his mind the sudden urge to grab her head and slam her against the shelves.

Instead, the tiny little bit of control made him take a deep breath, curl his hands into tight fists, before he turned and stared at Mrs. Wheeler, so badly wanting to cry out and tell her he needed help. That something was inside of him, that something terrible had

happened last night, and he thought he was dying. Instead, he knew if he stayed in this closet with this foolish woman a second longer, he would lose control. Instead he turned and told her flat out to stay away from him. He saw the stunned hurt expression in her eyes, but he pushed past. He felt worse now, head throbbing, as the shadow loomed over him. He had heard Heather when she told him she was pregnant, and for a small fraction of a second he tried to fight off the shadow like he had when he saw himself hurting Mrs. Wheeler. Instead, he lost all control, and watched frozen beneath the surface as he hit her, and watched himself tie her up and dump her in his trunk. Now hours later, he brought her to the factory, carefully laying her down. He took the tape off, and saw how frightened she was. Feeling like a creature from a monster movie, he spoke low, warning her to stay still, promising her it would be over soon. He stood back, as the creature emerged from the shadows, massive, smelling of chemicals, and rotting flesh. Heather struggled from the ground, tears running down her face, as she screamed. The creature continued coming closer, as Billy stood back, feeling tears roll down his face that he didn't even know he was having. Heather turned her head, staring up at him absolutely terrified.

"Billy please! HELP ME! BILLY PLEASE I DON'T WANNA DIE, I DON'T WANT OUR BABY TO DIE!"

Billy felt the shadow take a firm grip on him, not allowing him to move. Instead he stood frozen, as he watched the creature attach itself to Heather, cutting off her screams as he pumped whatever it was that now held Billy, trapped within his own body. He watched as it had its way with Heather, before slowly breaking apart, oozing and crawling away into the shadows, spreading. Heather appeared to be having a seizure, convulsing on floor. Billy, frozen like a statue, stared down, looking through his eyes, watching her completely helpless, before a flickering memory came back to the night July had her seizure and she was taken to the hospital. At this exact moment he wanted to be dead more than anything. That's when he felt something. He felt somebody watching him. He froze for a second, before turning. For a brief second he thought he saw the image of somebody standing by the stairs watching him. He felt his arms break out in goosebumps, as he stared forward. Somebody was watching him... Just like that, it vanished, as did the feeling. Heather stopped

convulsing, before her eyes opened, and he saw the difference. The shadow was now inside her. Billy felt himself move slowly, before leaning down and undoing the ropes.

Once she was free, she stood up and stared at him. She would go home tonight so her parents wouldn't worry, somehow she mentally spoke to him without opening her mouth. Her mother would be downtown helping prepare for the town fair for the community group she was part of with other rich bored housewives. Her darling daddy would be working at the newspaper. Billy would come over before dawn, park down the street, and stay out of sight. Heather would tell her darling parents that she tripped if her face happened to bruise, and cover it up with makeup, the shadow would start taking hold, and slowly she would start feeling its effects. He would come over, show her that the shadow liked it cold. They would use chemicals, whatever they could get a hold of, and then plan on collecting her parents. Things were happening fast, and this shadow needed an army. Billy knew, whatever nightmare was happening, there was no turning back. Billy stared at her, before he felt his hand cup the side of her face, as he locked eyes with her.

"I'll drive you home, not a word. Go to sleep, wait until morning after they leave. You're going to get weak, I will help you."

Heather nodded, transfixed. Billy's eyes went down to Heather's flat stomach. Inside of her was his child, conceived probably one reckless night after hours at the pool. He wondered after the creature had gone inside of her if it was dead or not? He continued staring at her flat stomach, before a painful twinge ripped through his body. He snapped his eyes shut, holding back a moan, before Heather's hand slipped into his.

"Take me home."

Her voice was flat, yet he knew part of the creature was now inside of her. He stared at her, before he squeezed her hand, wanting so badly to break free of whatever this was that was now controlling the two of them, and was currently spreading all over Hawkins. He wasn't in control of himself anymore, and he knew he was all ready half dead after having those chemicals. Mentally he heard a voice tell him that Heather would supply him with a heavy liquid sleep aid

drug that her mother kept upstairs in her dresser, something she would drip into her evening tea whenever her headaches got too bad. Millions of thoughts were sent to him, he knew this medicine was something Heather's mother had gotten in the late 1970's since it was taken off the market. He figured he could drug them with Heather, and bring them here. They didn't even need to speak or make a plan. Instead he saw Heather in his mind asking them if she could invite a boy she had just started dating over. Billy would lay on the charm, and by the end of the night both would end up drugged, tied up, and inside his trunk. He would show Heather how to use the chemicals, and how this creature liked the cold. They had to work together, and it grew larger, building it to what it wanted. Then, he would allow himself to die, simple as that. He had no control, and knew plenty of innocent people were going to die.

Tonight, it started with Heather, and his unborn child.

Later...

Billy didn't remember dropping Heather off. He didn't remember speaking, he didn't remember even driving. Instead he parked in front of the house, and somehow found himself standing in the bathroom. It was late, Neil and Susan were thankfully asleep. The house was dark, and quiet. He could hear the steady hum of Neil and Susan's window unit from down the hall. It was a hot and sticky night, and as he flicked on the overhead light, he squinted suddenly feeling nauseous. Instead, he flicked on the lights above his sink, which were softer and not as bright. Breathing heavy, his stomach twisted, and he got awful chest pains. He then saw he had a brown paper bag from the mini-mart down the street. He didn't even remember stopping by. He dropped the heavy bag down on the counter, and saw it was filled to the top with bags of ice.

Cold... Cold was the only thing that would stop this horrible pain. He turned, and began filling the tub with cold water. He felt as if he had a horrible fever, and this was the only thing that would save him. Breathing heavy, he waited until the water had filled the tub halfway, before shutting it off. Grabbing the bags, he didn't even bother to rip open the bags, instead he threw them all in, watching them plop into the cold water, splashing upwards. Swaying, he took a second before stripping off his clothes. Carefully, he eased himself

into the tub, snapping his eyes shut as he bit down on bottom lip, stopping a moan instantly, just like earlier with the chemicals, he felt relief. Cold, all he wanted to do was be cold. The pain inside of him eased, as he laid back, surrounded by the bags of ice, tilting his head back, closing his eyes, as the shadow eased up around him. He knew he had regained a little bit of control, but feared any false move it would take full control again. All he remembered were brief flashes, trapped inside his body, doing terrible things. He laid back, naked in the freezing water knowing that this was just the beginning...

Two nights later...

Billy limped into the woods, headed straight to the factory. He was barefoot and shirtless, but the shadow that was possessing him prevented him from collapsing. Everything hurt, and he knew he had come very close to getting killed. Last night at Heather's was the first time he had met Max's friend El, and the shadow inside of him remembered that she was the one who had closed the gate a year ago. The shadow knew as soon as enough people joined in as one, it would be large enough, and strong enough to destroy this town, and destroy the girl. The gate would stay open, and it would destroy everything. Billy desperately was trapped inside his own body, locked inside, watching through his eyes. For a brief instantly he was himself when Max and her little friends trapped him inside the sauna. He fought back, breaking away from the shadow's tight hold, and broke down crying.

This was the first time he had truly broken down since July died. He begged to Max who stared at him through the tiny window that it wasn't his fault. He thought of last night what happened to Heather's parents, and all of the chemicals they swallowed together. He remembered watching Heather guzzle everything underneath her kitchen sink. He watched, trapped inside his own body watching her drink bleach cleaner, knowing now officially their unborn baby was dead. He so badly wanted to scream at her to stop, but instead the shadow firmly held onto him, making him unable to stop her and watch as she not only killed herself, but their child as well.

They brought Heather's parents, and kidnapped several others, dragging them to the factory, feeling themselves grow stronger. He remembered holding Heather in an ice bath. at her house, and how in

a trace they walked side by side as the creature got larger and larger. Tonight those little shits had tried to stop the creature that was inside of him. He broke free fast enough to try and tell Max it wasn't his fault, when suddenly the darkness took over and he reached for a broken piece of tile. He broke through the window, screaming that he was going to kill Max, when he finally lost it completely and broke free. He saw himself grabbing the girl's throat, when suddenly he felt himself getting thrown around by an unknown force. His veins throbbed, his blood now black and reeking of chemicals. He was changing into something, and he knew the only thing that was keeping him alive was this creature. He blacked out, and found himself at the factory. Heather was there, and both sat on the metal stairs as he touched up his wounds that felt numb. She reassured him that the girl couldn't hurt them if they stayed together. They watched, as twenty or so people they led here swayed, watching the creature grow, feeding it. Tomorrow night they were going to kill him. Billy returned later for his car, it was nearly four in the morning, but he no longer cared. He drove home, and as he entered the dark house, the little real part of himself that existed, was relieved to see Max's bedroom door open, and her bed empty.

That meant she was still with her friends, and hopefully staying far away. He had been on autopilot this entire, even earlier at work as he sat in the shade, the shadow lingering inside of him. He knew people were going to die. He walked nearly right into Neil who was groggy, hungover, and shuffling back from the bathroom. Both looked at each other in the darkness of the hallway. Billy knew what a mess he must have looked. He was just in jeans, barefoot, his cheek scratched with black blood, and his hair a mess. He hoped with how dark it was in the hallway, his father wouldn't notice the color of his blood. Neil stared at him.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

"Work."

Billy answered, sounding like a creature from a bad dream. Neil glared at him.

"Coming in at four in the morning? What do you think I am? Fucking stupid?"

Billy swayed, feeling his head throb, as his hands tightened into fists. Neil stepped closer, less than an inch away from him.

"You better get your fucking act together real fast buddy. Get a real job, and stop wandering if after a night of fucking these local whores. You've been acting like a fucking cry baby ever since that girlfriend of yours died. You better fucking learn how to move on real quick, I'm sick and fucking tired hearing about it. Either get your shit together, or just fucking kill yourself you fucking pussy."

With that, he smirked, and turned, walking back to his bedroom, shutting the door behind him. Billy was left standing alone in the hallway. He swayed, thinking of charging full speed towards his father's bedroom door, breaking open the door as if it was tissue paper, and ripping apart the broken splintered pieces of wood as he walked in, twisting both Susan and Neil's necks, breaking them like twigs. This image continued playing over and over again, when just like how he resisted it with Mrs. Wheeler, he closed his eyes breathing heavy before the image broke up and vanished. Tomorrow was the 4th of July, and this shadow had mentally told him that it would be ready. The people it had infected in town would all gather at the factory, it would grow to it's full size, and then it would destroy... Billy felt as if he was half there, he would only resurface maybe for a few minutes each other, trapped inside his body. The only real sign of him was the helpless frightened tears that escaped his eyes, as his body continued on autopilot. He knew Heather was the same now, as were her parents, and all of the others.

Billy knew they were all hosts, and whatever this thing was seemed to be getting stronger. He remembered guzzling more chemicals and cleaning projects with Heather. He remembered dragging the tied up bodies of her parents. He remembered watching as the creature infected them, and remembered dragging Heather into a tub of ice. He remembered going to work, zoning out, staying in the shade, and how Max and her little shit friends had trapped him. He remembered them trapping him in the sauna, and how for just a few mere moments he tried to break free and warn them. He knew the shadow was returning, and he was terrified he might actually hurt or even kill them. He tried to tell Max as she stared at him through the small window that it wasn't his fault. That whatever this was had forced

him to do terrible things.

Then he felt himself reach for the piece of tile, and nearly kill Max. That's when the girl came out of nowhere, the same girl he had met the other night at Heather's. The same girl who the shadow remembered had closed the gate. Frightened, he had only been half aware during the fight, but he knew with whatever had happened, had the shadow not been with him, he would have been killed. His body ached and throbbed, and when he limped to the factory where Heather reassured him she couldn't hurt him...or any of them if they stayed together. Tomorrow, they would be ready. Billy now stood in the darkness of his hallway and figured tonight might very well be the last time he ever slept at his house again.

He limped to his bedroom, eyeing Max's open dark bedroom, knowing she was smart to stay away. Shutting his eyes, he thought back to this winter when the little brat had started her period. He remembered how embarrassed both of them had been, but at the end of the evening he had made the best of things for her, and both had fallen asleep on the couch together. How good he felt, like a real big brother. He wished he could have explained that his past behavior had just been because he was trying to look out for her. That he was no longer angry about what happened about California and them being forced to move. That if they hadn't, he would have never met July. To him, everything he had been through had been worth it.

Those few months with July he knew they had loved a lifetime's worth, and even if the end was near...maybe just maybe that meant he would be with July. No, he figured he loved Max, and hated whatever this thing was that made him do these terrible things. He wished he could warn her somehow. To tell her and her friends to stay far away, that whatever this thing was...it was bigger than they all thought, and very dangerous. It meant to kill them all. Billy knew he didn't have much time left, and couldn't protect Max. Just like he couldn't save July for her illness, or save Heather and the baby from this thing. No, they would all die if they tried to fight it...and time was running out. He kept the light off, and limped to his bed. His stomach ached, and his muscles throbbed. He noticed his cheek was thinly bleeding black oozing blood. He sat down on the edge of his bed, and grabbed a white undershirt. He slipped it on top of his

sweaty sore body, and sat in silence for a moment. Everything hurt, and he felt the shadow order him to sit there, well until after dawn and wait.

This girl, El...would be searching for him. He needed to be ready. Sitting there, he stared forward in the darkness of his bedroom, before he glanced down. He saw July's scarf, laying half tucked under his pillow. He didn't want to touch it. He didn't want his blood stained murdering hands to touch the last piece of his few small remains of a time he was once happy... He stared down at it, eyes filling with tears, knowing he was trapped. Instead, he turned and stared forward, waiting.

A single tear rolled down his face.

The next morning...

"It's California...it's a memory."

Max said feeling guilty, remembering how rough everything had become when she decided to use her rejection of Billy into telling on him and that stupid teacher of his. She knew her stupid little schoolgirl crush had gotten the best of her, and she didn't care what happened to Billy when his father found out. She watched in those few brief months as everything got destroyed for Billy. She witnessed him being beaten so badly by Neil, he had fallen to the floor, mouth gushing blood. Her mother as always told her that whatever happened between Neil and Billy was their business, and she should count herself lucky that Neil never did such things to them, that Billy had lots of issues after his mother had left and died. Still, she knew what she had done was wrong, and it explained so much on how angry Billy had became when they were forced to move after the scandal.

She slowly understood his anger was perfectly understandable, and that the real reason why she had such a problem was Lucas wasn't the color of his skin, or the fact he "liked" Max, it was because he had seen Lucas and her fighting, and it could have been anyone he would have lost it on. All he saw was a young kid bothering her, and making her upset. She remembered his speech about how like it or not, they were family and stuck with each other. She remembered the

crazed look in his eyes when he grabbed her wrist, wanting her and how scared she became...seeing Neil in his eyes. She remembered standing up to Billy, and how he laid off her, actually being really decent to her he had become for those few months he dated July. She remembered the night everything happened at Will's house, and how she had finally stood up to him, and how afterwards how scared he seemed at July's when he learned she was being taken to the hospital after having a seizure. She saw the real Billy... He had tried his best, and they had a few decent moments, but she sensed him fading away since July's death. Now thing creature had gotten him, using him as a host. She had never been so scared before in her entire life the night oof the sauna, and knew very well if this continued the way it was...Billy was going to die. Now El had entered his mind, trying to find the source, and was back in his memories. El spoke of a blond woman on the beach, and Max knew it was his mother. The same woman who she had overheard Neil and her mother talking about a few times before. Billy's mother had abandoned him, and later was killed in a car crash.

He never spoke about her, but Max knew it was a sore subject whenever she was mentioned or brought up. El spoke softly, narrating what she was seeing as she continued to venture forward deeper into Billy's mind. Hurtful memories of Neil abusing Billy and his mother, causing her to take off. More hurtful embarrassing memories of Neil abusing Billy. Hitting him, calling him names, beating him as time went on. El said she saw when Neil first brought Susan home a few years ago. Max herself barley remembered this, and how cold Billy had been.

"There's another girl, she's wearing a scarf around her head...she's pretty. Both are sitting in Billy's car, he has his arm around her..."

Max signed knowing who this was.

"July...Billy's girlfriend who died this winter."

The others all dropped their eyes, they all vaguely knew July or what had happened to her. Max knew her best of all, remembering how sweet she had been to her, and how Billy actutaly seemed like a half decent human being when she was alive. It killed her knowing most of Billy's most vivid memories were of the tiny bit of happiness he

had with his mother and July. The rest all of his abuse... She shut her eyes and sighed. It wasn't. that long before El whipped off her blindfold, nose gushing blood crying in Mike's eyes. She told them Billy had found her, and had warned her that whatever this thing was...it was planning on killing them all.

Max hated to think it, but she knew her stepbrother wasn't going to make it out of this alive.

19. A perfect world

Late December 1984

Billy sat up in July's bed, reaching for his pack of cigarettes that laid on her nightstand. Grabbing them and his cheap plastic lighter, he was ready to throw back the comforter and go to the window as he usually did to have his after sex smoke. Instead July muttered, holding onto him and shook her head as she laid beside him.

"Don't. Smoke it here...keep me warm."

Billy stared down at her, before shrugging.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, a little second hand smoke isn't gonna kill me, lay here."

Billy smirked, as he pulled a cigarette out, popped it into his mouth, and grabbed the lighter, lighting it, before he took a nice long drag of it. Sitting up against her headboard, he glanced down as she snuggled up close against him. He felt the warmth of her breasts against his side, and stared down at her naked form. Tonight he had snuck over, and both had successfully had a pretty fun past hour, trying to keep it down, and prevent her bed from creaking since her mother was just down the hallway watching the late show in her bedroom. He sat smoking his cigarette, when he stared down at her and smirked.

"Hey firecracker, what would it take for you to consider marrying me after graduation?"

July glanced up before she sadly smiled. Her hands went across to his flat tanned stomach and rubbed. "I all ready told you Billy..." Billy who usually lost his temper, simply sighed, taking another long drag of his cigarette and stubbed it out into a can of ginger-ale July had brought upstairs to settle her stomach. He turned instead, frowning, before he cupped the sides of her face, staring down at her with serious eyes.

"I told you...you're gonna beat this fucking thing, and we're gonna

leave this Hell hole, and we're headed straight to California."

July sighed, staring up at him, before she nodded, and sat up, laying her head against his chest, nuzzling against him, playing with his St. Christopher necklace.

"Then what?"

"We're gonna get married. July Hargrove, how does that sound?"

He stroked her back gently, as she kissed his chest and smiled.

"Has a nice catch to it."

"You'll go to school, I'll work a few off jobs at garages, then open our surf shop and teach lessons."

"You'll teach me right?"

"Of course, you'll be my first student. I can't wait to show you. The sunrises off the beach are beautiful. My mother used to..."

He stopped for a second, and July lifted her head staring at him. Looking right in his eyes she understood why this was so hard to talk about.

"You used to go there with her?"

Billy hated it, but he felt tears starting to fill his eyes. Embarrassed, he blinked and looked off to the side.

"Yeah..."

"You miss her don't you?"

July stared at him, before Billy nodded, allowing a single tear to roll down his face. Seeing it, July reached and wiped it away for him, leaning in close. Pressing her forehead against his, she reached for his hand and squeezed it tight.

"You'll take me there someday, promise?"

Billy sniffled, before smiling and nodding, wrapping his arm around

her and pressing her as tight as he could.

"I will, I promise..."

Present. July 4th 1985

Before Billy climbed into the Camaro after finding El's blood at the market, he knew which direction they were heading in. The Starcourt Mall. Part of the shadow had bitten the girl and was inside her. They were all connected, and he had plans on driving out there and waiting, trapping them inside until the monster had grown large enough to arrive and kill them all. He knew everyone who had been infected, including Heather and her parents were dead, absorbed inside it, causing it to be massive. It would kill everyone, and destroy the entire town. He had spoken to El when she had entered his mind, and he had located her to that piece of shit cabin the sheriff owned in the middle of the woods. Billy thought Hopper was a piece of shit, but ever since that night July had been taken to the hospital, the two had a strange understanding for each other. Just two months ago he had been pulled over for speeding while driving to go visit July's grave. He tried to have a huge attitude with him, but the sheriff wasn't having any of this. He told Billy to cut the shit, that his "charm" wasn't working on him.

That's when Billy thought Hopper might have noticed the black eye he was sporting underneath his sunglasses. For a mere second Billy wanted so badly to tell the sheriff what his father had been doing to him. Instead, he just sat back waiting for him to write him a ticket and send him on his way. Instead, the sheriff stared at him for a second, and finally shook his head.

"I'm gonna give you a warning this time, but watch this speed."

Billy didn't respond. Instead, Hopper sighed.

"She's buried in the same cemetery my daughter is buried at. Trust me...I get it."

Without so much as another word, Hopper turned and walked back to his cruiser. Billy was left feeling puzzled, and it wasn't until he casually asked around that he found out Hopper had a little girl who

died of cancer...same as July. He decided it was for the best to steer clear of him. Now here he was, being controlled by whatever this thing was, unable to stop it. He could feel whatever it was pulsing in his veins like poison. Before he climbed in from the market, he noticed his trunk had been left open. He couldn't remember even opening it, but figured if it flew open while driving the chances of him getting pulled over were pretty high since this was a holiday after all and extra officers were scattered all over for checkpoints. He circled around and went to slam it shut when something caught his eye. He raised an eyebrow, opening the trunk completely, and reaching down.

Here he took out July's framed photo of the two of them Max had made. His copy had been destroyed shortly after July had died. This one had been given to her by July's mother the day of her funeral. He remembered tossing it into the trunk, and had completely forgotten about it. He looked down and saw the framed photo of him and July.

Staring at it, he felt himself...the real him come to surface for a second. He slowly reached down, holding it before staring at the photo that seemed to be taken a million years ago. He looked down at it, and a horrible ache had replaced where his heart was. He lowered his head, shaking all over, as the shadow seemed to take over him again. His brain was poisoned as he so badly wanted to scream. It wasn't fair...it wasn't fucking fair.

Why did she have to die?

Why did this have to happen to him? He thought back on all the endless years of abuse by his father since his mother took off. How angry he had become, and how all of his mistakes seemed to be leading up until now. California, the move here, and losing July. He thought back on those brief happy months he had shared with her, and then hearing July's mother inform him that she had died in the middle of the night.

It wasn't fair, it wasn't...

He closed his eyes, feeling rear tears squeeze through his long lashes, before the darkness overtook him. He threw the photo back inside the trunk and slammed it shut. Turning, his chest heaved before he

went around front, and climbed behind the wheel. Glaring, he started the engine, and began to drive straight towards the Starcourt Mall.

Later...

He couldn't stop. He was trapped. Even when he raced his car towards Nancy Wheeler at the entrance of the mall. He had made the engine roar, desperate inside as he watched through his eyes, praying the kids would get out of there in time.

Max with with them...

He remembered something hitting him, as the car crashed, and minutes later crawling out, seeing the engine just starting to get engulfed by flames, as he climbed out, hissing in pain. His ribs were broken. He saw Max, some other kid, and the girl that the shadow was after and he was ordered within his mind to get her. He walked, prying open the gate, screaming inside at the pain of his broken bones, but limped forward, his dark veins surging with the chemicals and blackened blood. He walked through the back hallways, before he reached them. Max tried to plead with him, saying his name and his address, but the shadow forced him to smack her and throw her to the ground. He did the same with the boy, and finally the girl that the shadow wanted. He threw her over his shoulder and walked, knowing the creature was near. He suspected he was dying, but as much as his mind screamed for him to stop, his body wouldn't allow it. Tears ran down his eyes as he marched into the mall, ripping open the metal gate to the front of the ice cream shop, and towards the food court. The creature had broken in, glass shattering everywhere. He had done it...this would all be over soon. Carefully he laid the girl down, before climbing on top of her and whispering.

"It will all be over soon..."

The same as he did with his other victims, including Heather and his unborn child which were now inside this massive creature that loomed over them. The girl's eyes looked frightened as she stared up and Billy stood back. That's when the explosives started to happen, brilliant flashes of red, gold, silver, and blue flashed about as Billy felt pain as the monster screamed. The crackles and bangs became louder and louder as he cried out knowing that if the creature was

harm, so wasn't he. He was its host, and he felt everything. The fireworks continued to go off above him, as he screamed in agony and defeat. The girl had tried to get away but he roared and climbed on top of her, straddling her and slamming her down onto the ground, pinning her down as she yelled. He stared down at her, furious when suddenly she locked eyes with him, no longer scared, but tears falling nevertheless as she looked at him.

"Seven...feet."

He froze.

"You told her the wave was seven feet. You ran to her...on the beach. There were seagulls. She wore a hat with a blue ribbon...a long dress with a blue and red flower. Yellow...yellow sandals, covered in sand. Then...there was a girl, who wore a scarf, she sat in your car, and made you laugh. She had green eyes. They were pretty...they were really pretty...and you...you were happy."

Billy froze staring down, images of his mother and July appeared before him. The girl reached up, gently cupping his face, her hand soft, cool, and gentle. He nodded, a tear rolling down his face. That's when he knew, those terrible things hadn't been him. It was whatever this monster was. He hadn't been in control. He knew this was it. As soon as he drank those chemicals he was as good as dead. Now it was up to him if he died trying to do one thing right, or allow it to take him over. Staring down at the girl, he thought of Max, and knew he wouldn't allow this creature to touch her. Standing, he stared up at the massive creature, and just as it lunged out to grab the girl, he reached forward, slamming his fists into it. The teeth clamped down on him, ripping into him. He screamed out, as more tentacles of the creature shot out, stabbing him from all over. He felt the shooting burning pain as it ripped into him.

He stared up, and no longer saw the monster. He saw his father, he saw the cancer that had killed July, he saw all the hurt and miserable pain he had suffered from...standing before him. He stared up, and screamed, black blood gurgling up his throat and through his mouth. That's when the last tentacle stabbed him right in his chest, a white hot burning pain hitting him straight where his heart was, ripping apart muscles, and ripping into his heart.

He felt suddenly everything slow down, sounds fading out. He swayed, strength draining out of him, as he thought he heard somebody scream his name, before he fell backwards down hard to the ground. Max was there, climbing over crying. Billy suddenly felt very cold, he couldn't feel his arms or legs. He tasted chemicals, and knew he was dying. He coughed up the black blood, before staring up at his sister. He knew this was it. Staring up at her tear filled eyes, he sighed, knowing he could barley move.

The pain was gone, which was nice...now everything was fading out and getting dark.

"Sorry..."

He was able to say, barley above a whisper...then less than five seconds later, his heart stopped, and Billy Hargrove died.

His step-sister Max weeped over his body, begging him to wake up. Instead, his black blood splattered body laid there lifeless, no longer in pain, no longer suffering. When the paramedics loaded his body up, zipping it in a body bag, they exchanged confused looks. They couldn't quite understand why his blood was black, or where these massive puncture marks were from? In the end the cause of death was a combination between a lethal dose of chemicals drank by Billy, as well as entry wound that had punctured his heart. Neil IDed the body, and paid for the cheapest casket there was. He was buried in the same cemetery as July, less than give rows away from her. Max broke down crying that day, surrounded by her friends, while Neil rolled his eyes, muttering that he knew that boy was going to die an early death with the way he lived. Max meanwhile was left heartbroken, knowing with the coverup, they would never understand the sacrifice Billy had given to save El's life. She demanded they didn't do anything with his room yet. Susan had brought some boxes for donations, but Max wasn't ready yet. She had cleaned up around there, and often sat on the bed whenever she felt overwhelmed and lonely. Neil acted as if nothing happened, in fact he seemed almost happy Billy was gone. Max meanwhile missed him, and mourned him in private. While cleaning one day, she found July's scarf underneath his pillow and sighed. She hoped wherever Billy was...he was at least with July and happy. Before the Camaro was taken to the junkyard, a complete loss, Max had seen a small box

of personal belongings left and given to them by the garage that Neil had cashed the car in for parts.

Max had seen it was his jean jacket, a few tapes, and finally...the framed photo of him and July in that stupid frame she had made for them. She decided to keep this in her room. She didn't have any other photos of Billy, and felt in at least this one he seemed happy. She missed her brother, and day after day when things seemed too overwhelming, she would sit in silence on his bed, praying he found peace in death he couldn't in life...

Elsewhere...

At the exact moment Billy's heart stopped, and Max's cries faded out, so didn't the pain. Billy suddenly opened his eyes and instead of finding himself in the destroyed mall, the smell of chemicals, gunpowder, and blood, he was welcomed to the smells of ocean water, and sand. His eyes squinted at the bright warm sunlight and shinned down on him. He took a second, adjusting to wherever he was, when he saw he was on a beach in California. He was sitting in swim trunks, and on the warm sugar colored sand. He looked around, confused, as he stared up and down the vast beach as seagulls cried and flew around. He stared forward at the water, watching the crystal clear water crash against the surf, foaming, and looking completely perfect. He sat there, and couldn't believe it. He was home. He had his earring on, the same one July had given him. He ran his fingers through his curling hair, and sat back, his skin unmarked, and tanned. He looked around and smirked. Was he dead? He knew something had happened, but he couldn't quite remember.

All he knew, was that he was home, and nothing hurt now. The sun was shining, and it was a beautiful warm summer day. He sat back when suddenly he heard a voice, the same voice he had so desperately wanted to hear for what seemed like a lifetime. "So, when are you teaching me how to surf mister?" Billy's eyes widened as he froze. Slowly, he looked over his shoulder, and saw her. July stood there, healthy and alive. She had her hair back, pinned up like how he loved it, tiny strands curled down framing her beautiful face. She wore a black two piece, and her skin wasn't sickly and pale. No, it was tanned and golden like his. She smiled, staring at him. Billy blinked. No...it couldn't be. He scrambled to his feet, and stared at

her blinking, unable to believe it. "July?" July smiled and stepped forward, cocking her head to the side.

"I've been waiting for you...now are we surfing or what?"

Billy felt his chest heave, as he stared at her, suddenly beyond overwhelmed. Tears of exhaustion and relief broke through before he stepped forward, scooping her up as she squealed with delight as he lifted her up and gave her a tight squeeze. Holding her, he passionately kissed her, pressing his lips against hers, never feeling he had wanted to kiss somebody as badly as he had wanted to more than now. She tasted sweet, like honey. Breathing heavy, he pressed his forehead against hers, and held her so tight she laughed. Finally, he swayed and set her back down on her feet. She smiled, reaching and brushing his hair back out of his eyes. "What took you so long?" Billy smirked, kissing her again before laughing. "It's a long story..." July smiled, lacing her hands into his. "Well tell me...trust me, we have all the time in the world now." Laughing, Billy scooped up July as she laughed, kicking her legs as she laughed as he spun her around. Both tickled and chased each other. They swam, and he taught her how to surf. They made love in the shore, and later laid in each other's arms watching beautiful fireworks in the summer night sky. She told him it would be like this very night.

He stared at her smiling, kissing her temple, and holding her tight. His little firecracker. This might very well be Heaven, and if it was, it was perfectly fine for him. July with with him, and as the brilliant beautiful fireworks exploded in the sky, reflecting against his eyes, he smiled and kissed the top of her head. This was their beach, they were together, and nobody could ever hurt them. They were in their own perfect world...together forever.

The End.

20. The End

No Guarantees - The Nobodys

Max knelt at her brother's grave. It had been three months, but it still hurt like Hell. Lucas had been wonderful, but she knew he didn't quite understand. Sighing, she brushed her fingertips against head headstone that Neil was still bitching about paying for. She felt her chest ache, remembering that night at the mall. Nobody would ever talk about what happened...nobody would ever know the truth or how he scarified his life for El.

She missed him so badly...

She lowered her head as tears fell from her face. She loved him...she loved him so much and was so sorry. She hoped if there was a Heaven, God would have forgiven Billy, knowing he wasn't responsible, and let him be with July. She hoped they were together... Sighing, she lowered her head, hating that she very well might be...the only person that mourned Billy Hargrove.

The End

A very special thanks to everyone who read my story and reviewed it! Loved Billy this season! Would love to do a story about him and Steve soon!

- Thecricketsarecalling